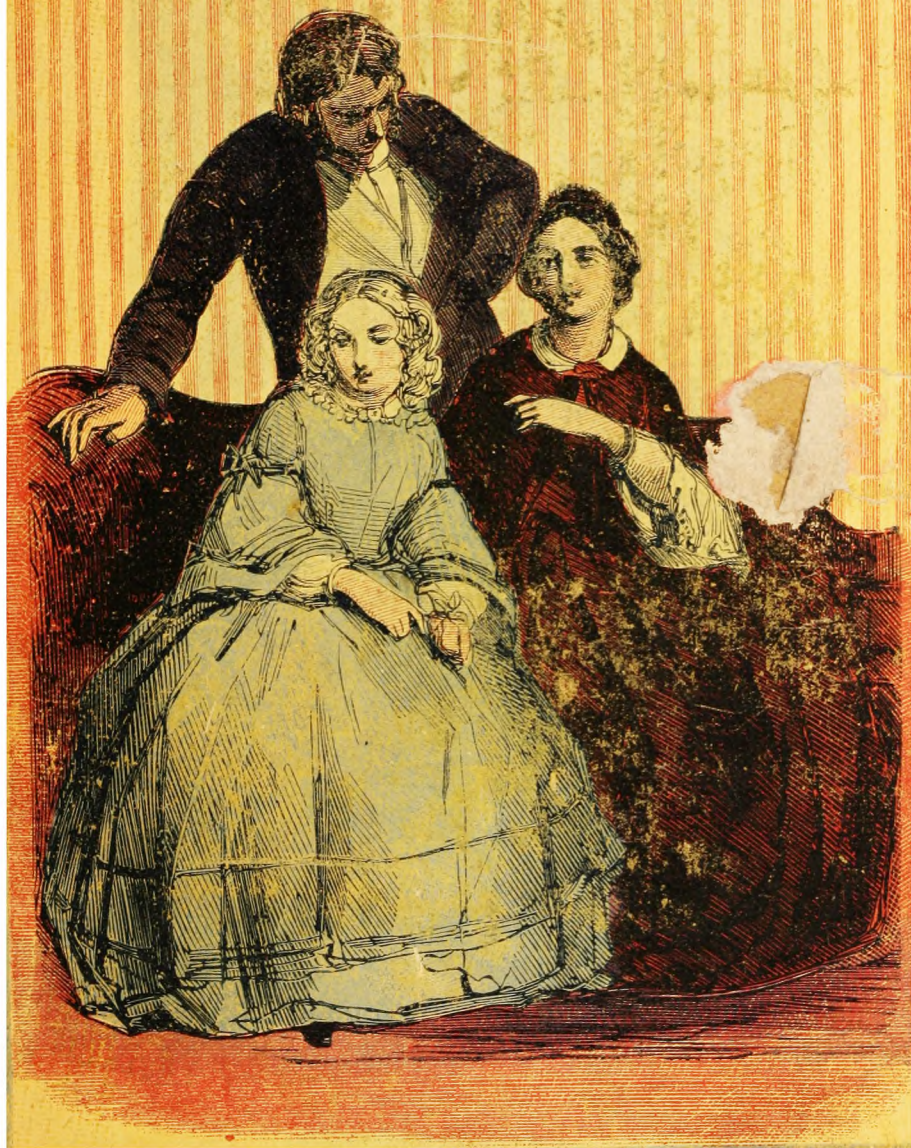


THE RIVAL BEAUTIES

BY MISS PARDOE.





JAMES H. GRAFF,

BALTIMORE

N^o. 1836

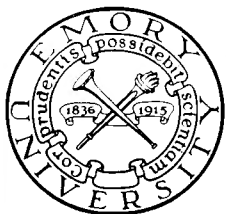
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THE
RIVAL BEAUTIES.

THE
RIVAL BEAUTIES.

A Novel.

BY
MISS PARDOE,
AUTHOR OF "THE CONFESSIONS OF A PRETTY WOMAN,"
"JEALOUS WIFE," ETC., ETC.

LONDON:
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.
1867.

THE RIVAL BEAUTIES.

CHAPTER I.

ON the southern outskirt of a pleasant town in the west of England, which I shall here call Westrum, stood an antique-looking house, evidently never originally intended to suffer such close contact with the mercantile street from which it was distant little more than a hundred yards. A lofty wall of dull red brick, divided into equal lengths by a richly-decorated gate of wrought-iron, supported by pillars of coarse granite, each surmounted by a rudely-sculptured griffin with its dexter claw resting upon a dagger, skirted the highroad for a considerable distance on either hand, overtopped here and there by the stately crest of a pine, or the spreading branches of an ancient oak; while, from the gate itself, a straight avenue of limes, whose dense foliage almost shut out the sunlight, extended to the house door, which was approached by a stately flight of broad stone steps. The dwelling was vast, plain in its appearance, and evidently constructed rather for comfort than for show. From the road it presented simply a solid square of brick-work, with its regularly-pierced windows encased in that peculiarly wrought stone which looks as though it had been subjected to the action of a strong rippling tide; but on the side which faced the extensive grounds the uniformity was broken up by a boldly-projecting bay, where large glass doors, opening upon a lawn, afforded an unimpeded view into the vast saloon beyond them.

A spacious conservatory, rich in rare and exotic plants,

abutted upon this summer apartment, whence it was approached by a lateral door, and when this was flung back flooded the room with perfume; while the eye was equally entranced by the lovely home-view presented by the luxuriant shrubberies, the glittering little stream that terminated the descent of the sloping lawn, and the gambols of a couple of tame deer, which browsed or sported confidingly under the shadows of the tall trees, among whose leafy branches roosted a stately peacock.

The whole appearance of such an establishment in such a position was an anachronism. The venerable building was vast enough to have shown to advantage, as regarded its capabilities, in the midst of a park of some hundred acres, whereas it was seated on the verge of a property scarcely exceeding six; while the undeniable marks of antiquity which it bore about it were sufficient to satisfy the mind of a stranger that the little town by which it was now elbowed had grown up to it after the fashion of the continental villages, which spring like fungi about a wealthy monastic house.

In the centre saloon to which we have referred were seated, on a glorious autumnal noon, two ladies in deep mourning dresses. The close cap, concealed hair, and long crape weepers of the elder at once betrayed her recent widowhood, even had not the hatchment which surmounted the principal entrance already convinced those who looked upon it that sorrow and bereavement had lately visited this placid dwelling. She sat, or rather reclined, in a large chair, with her eyes fixed on vacancy, and evidently buried in thought; but that her reflections were not altogether painful was evident from the faint smile which at intervals played about her faded lips. She was still handsome although no longer young; and her countenance beamed with that graciousness which so attractively succeeds the bloom of youth in certain well-constituted natures. Time had touched her lightly, and it was easy to see that she had not cared to rebel against his advances. Tall, and finely formed, the elasticity of her movements almost belied the matronly years which had passed over her, for Mrs. Mortimer had lately suffered the first deep sorrow of a calm and happy life, while she had still many blessings to compensate for

her one heavy loss; and thus her heart had not grown old with time, but had remained pure, and warm, and generous, and shed its genial influence over her whole person.

Her companion was a fair girl, who could have numbered but sixteen or seventeen summers. She, too, as we have said, was attired in close and deep mourning, relieved, however, by a broad falling collar and wristbands of white crape, and still more by a profusion of light auburn hair, which flowed in redundant masses over her shoulders. Nothing could be more faultless than the pure Grecian outline of that young face and form, nor more angelic than the expression of the speaking features, even tempered as it was by a shade of sadness, which appeared rather habitual to them than the mere effect of circumstances.

She was seated before an embroidery-frame, and save when she occasionally glanced anxiously towards the elder lady, as if to convince herself that the protracted reverie into which she had fallen was not one calculated to increase her melancholy, she plied her needle busily and mechanically; although, from the varying expression of her face, it might be readily surmised that the elaborate undertaking in which she was engaged employed her fingers far more than her thoughts.

"Gertrude," murmured Mrs. Mortimer, suddenly, as, withdrawing her eyes from the unseen object on which they had so long been fixed, she turned them upon her companion, "I am beginning to weary for the return of Frederic. And you, my dear girl, shall you not, like me, be rejoiced to welcome him once more to his home, even bereaved as it is?"

A deep and burning blush was the only reply elicited by the question; but, as if unconscious of the fact, Mrs. Mortimer pursued, in an accent of tenderness—

"Poor dear Frederic! How devotedly he loved his father; and how little did he apprehend, when he hung upon his neck so fondly on his departure for this long and adventurous journey, that he looked on him for the last time!"

"My dear aunt!" sobbed out a low, soft voice.

"Forgive me, my beloved child," said Mrs. Mortimer,

as she extended her arms, into which the fair girl flung herself with a passionate burst of tears, "I distress you as well as myself by these incautious repinings; and I have still so much for which to be grateful. But when I think of my noble-hearted boy, and of the fresh trial which awaits us on our meeting, I can scarcely sustain the prospect, even while I pine to have him once more beside me. You, too, Gertrude—you upon whom I have built up such bright dreams of happiness to come—you can understand the struggle, can you not? Tell me frankly, Gertrude, do you not love him?"

A second blush, which almost dried the tears that rested upon her cheeks, was a more definite answer than the few inarticulate words by which it was accompanied.

"And now, Gertrude," pursued Mrs. Mortimer with a fond smile, "draw forward that stool, and seat yourself at my feet, for I have much to say to you—much on which not only your own happiness depends, but mine, and, I trust and believe, that of Frederic also. You have been a blessing to me, my sweet girl; and, could I dare to do so without sin, I should thank the dispensation which gave me so loving and so loved a daughter. Nor was the affection of your departed uncle less perfect; but you have yet to learn that, on his deathbed, his last prayer was for you and Frederic. For his *children*. He has made no provision for you in his will, for he has bequeathed to you something more worthy of the tenderness he felt for the daughter of his adoption, the pride of his latter years, and this bequest is the hand of his only son."

"Of Frederic!" gasped out her breathless listener.

"Even so; Frederic loves you. He *must* love you. Were you not the companions, the friends of long and happy years? How can it be otherwise? Five years of absence have changed you strangely, Gertrude—changed you from a pretty child into a graceful woman; and this change cannot but delight Frederic; while, on his side, the handsome youth of twenty is about to return to us an accomplished and travelled man of twenty-five; and surely you will find no fault with such an alteration? And now kiss me, my own love, and tell me that you shall be happy to become indeed my daughter!"

"Aunt!" exclaimed Gertrude, as she freed herself from

the embrace of her smiling relative, and cast herself upon her knees before her; "a grateful heart has few words. You know how I have ever loved you; how I loved him for whom we mourn; forgive me, then, if I declare that I dare not be happy as you would have me; my dear, dear aunt, I *dare* not. Oh, I beseech you, do not withdraw your hand! Do not misunderstand me, or you will break my heart! Indeed, indeed, you little know all that I feel; all that I would hope, did I dare to do so. Remember, my best, my only friend, that when Frederic—when Mr. Mortimer—left England, I was a mere girl of twelve years old, to whose childish fancies he granted an indulgence attributable at once to his own generous nature, and to his desire to act in all things according to the pleasure of his parents; and that I could not—even orphan and penniless as I am—that I could not throw myself on the mercy of a reluctant heart."

The brow of Mrs. Mortimer darkened for an instant, but the shadow passed away as rapidly as it had gathered; and it was with a playful smile that she smoothed down the long silken curls which streamed over her knees, as she asked cheerfully, "But is this all, my penniless and desolate young lady? Answer me honestly, as becomes your nature, and as you hope for my love and confidence."

"What can I say, dear aunt? Remember the days of my happy childhood. Was not your son, my dear, dear cousin, my constant, and almost my sole companion? Did he not forego even the sports he loved to share in mine? Did we not part with tears, such as, thanks to your fond affection! I have shed but once? He is young, enthusiastic, and full of talent. What, and who, may he not have seen since he left us? Can you not understand and appreciate all I mean?"

"I understand that you have evoked a spectre which I must exorcise," replied Mrs. Mortimer with a placid smile. "You, at least, can appreciate the merits of that home to which our dear truant is about to return; while I can, on my side, decide upon the value of the fair face which you estimate so lightly. No, Gertrude, you do yourself less than justice. Frederic may have seen, and been struck for a moment, by prouder beauty than your own; but when he seeks a wife, believe *me*, my child, he will ask nothing

beyond the bride whom his father's dying wishes have selected for him."

Silenced, but not convinced, Miss Mortimer could only raise the hand of her fond and indulgent relative to her lips with a thrill of silent gratitude far more eloquent than words. Young as she was, and reared as she had been in a retirement which almost amounted to seclusion, she at once felt all the delicacy and peculiarity of her position. The child of a younger brother who died ere his speculations had produced their anticipated results, and bequeathed her to the affectionate charity of the head of his house, she now, for the first time, became painfully conscious of her dependent situation, and of the thousand restraints which it imposed upon the dignity of her sex, when she should be thrown into constant contact with her wealthy and envied cousin; and thus not all the caresses of her aunt, whose imagination was busy with a bright and beaming future, could remove the sudden weight which had fallen upon her heart, and rested there.

Cheerful as she was constitutionally, the solitude of her girlhood, relieved only by the attendance of her masters, the indulgence of her relatives, and the society of the few mature friends of Mrs. Mortimer, had afforded her ample time for reflection and self-questioning; and although until this day she had never suspected that she loved the generous boy who had for long years been to her more than a brother there had nevertheless occurred moments in which her cheek had crimsoned, although there were none near to mark it, as she detected herself referring every little success in her studies, and every slight improvement in her person, to *his* approval, and to *his* praise. Now, however, her eyes were opened, and she trembled as she reflected how entirely she had suffered herself to be engrossed by his well-remembered image, and how eagerly she had wept and waited for each anxiously expected letter, when by some accident it was delayed, and with what impatience she had watched for the paragraph which was dedicated to herself.

Gertrude did not deceive herself. A grateful and loving nature had first prompted her to regard her cousin as the epitome of all human perfection while he was present, and the continual and incautious panegyrics of her aunt since

his departure had not only fostered, but even increased her mental enthusiasm. That Frederic, her own Frederic, should select any other wife than her gentle and beautiful Gertrude, never for an instant occurred to Mrs. Mortimer. That he should prefer any woman, however lovely and distinguished, to his fair and orphan cousin, none could have made her suspect, even for a moment; and thus she did not hesitate to pour forth all her heart and all her hopes into the very ear which should, for its own peace, have been deaf to such a theme.

The arrival of Frederic was every day expected, urgent letters having been despatched to Egypt, where he was then travelling with a friend, to apprise him of his father's danger, from the moment when the attendant physicians had forbidden all further hope; but the tale which we are now telling is not of recent date, and the means of transport from so far distant a land were at that period widely opposed to those of the present day. Thus three months had already elapsed since the grave had claimed its tenant; and the first rush of grief had partially subsided, to give place in the heart of Mrs. Mortimer to the anxious desire of once more embracing her long-absent son. With her sorrow had not exhausted itself in those wild, and phrenzied, and ungoverned paroxysms which necessarily induce their own remedy; it was rather a deep, and settled, and unfading regret; which, even while it admitted other affections and other hopes to their place in her bosom, was destined to end only with her life, and to become thenceforward a portion of her existence.

Her husband had left behind him an unsullied and honourable name, and she could dwell upon his memory with a well-grounded pride; while no portion of her wedded existence offered an occasion of remorse or of regret. And thus, even while her heart wept in secret over her bereavement, she had still a smile for other joys and a sympathy for other interests.

"My boy will find but one sad change awaiting him," she resumed, after a long and meditative pause; "little has transpired in our quiet neighbourhood to jar upon his early memories. Alas! it is at home—in the home he loved so well—that he must look for the one great and painful change; and that one we must endeavour to lighten as best

we may, my child. After five long years of vicissitude and excitement it will require all our exertions to counteract the monotony of a retreat like this; and nothing save this consideration could have induced me, at this early stage of my widowhood, to yield even to the representations of our good vicar, by making the acquaintance of the strangers at The Grange."

"It must, indeed, have been an effort," murmured Gertrude, still thinking of her absent cousin.

"And one which was ill repaid," acquiesced Mrs. Mortimer, "for I know not why, but I am not prepossessed by either mother or daughter, although their reception was most gracious."

"And yet Mrs. Delamere has the appearance of a kind-hearted, although indolent woman, while her daughter is decidedly a beauty."

"A beauty!" echoed Mrs. Mortimer, half indignantly, as her eyes rested upon the lovely face of her niece; "you have strange notions of beauty, my poor child. What! would you persuade me that you admire those bold black eyes, which seem to pierce to your very soul one moment, only to be lost the next beneath their long thick lashes, as though they shrank before your answering gaze; that haughty lip, which seems to smile reluctantly, and as if it would rather writhe with a sarcasm? And then her manner—so self-centred, so decided, so essentially unwomanly, would counteract any loveliness, however striking. That she is clever I do not doubt; but still not wise enough to forbear the exhibition of her powers, and to compel you to *feel* their extent; a most grievous error in woman, be her talent what it may. Could you fail to remark that the pale, sickly-looking Mrs. Delamere was but the echo of her radiant and self-appreciating daughter? In one short half hour I fear that I have read her character. Would that The Grange had still remained untenanted; for, believe me, its present inmates will ill replace its former owner. The one is a cypher and the other has no heart."

"Can this indeed be you, dear aunt?" asked Gertrude, looking up in wonder.

Mrs. Mortimer smiled.

"I appear bitter and ungenerous, my dear child, and

perhaps I am so, but that visit has left an uneasy impression on my mind."

"And yet the dear old vicar says that they have already done so much good," said the fair girl, persuasively, "that they have subscribed largely to the schools, made a donation to the almshouses, and desired him to furnish them with a list of the most deserving of the poor. Surely in this, at least, they have acted rightly."

"I admit all this, and cordially rejoice at it," replied the elder lady, "and yet I cannot like this brilliant stranger. That she is a spoiled child of fortune is evident, and as regards that fact she is perhaps entitled to indulgence; but she presumes too much upon her individuality; and, to come back once more to my original declaration, I am convinced that she has no heart."

CHAPTER II.

AND who was Miss Delamere? Who was this dark-eyed stranger, whose attractions Gertrude Mortimer strove to increase in her own eyes, simply, although unconsciously, that she might hear herself accused of exaggeration by her aunt?

Upon this point we have little to tell. The Grange, rendered vacant by the pecuniary embarrassment of its former proprietor, had been advertised for sale in the public prints, and, after having been visited by an agent, had finally been purchased at a liberal price by its present owners; but of the antecedents of these ladies no one in the neighbourhood knew anything. They had arrived, taken possession, applied for a pew in the parish church, and, as a natural consequence, been waited upon by the vicar, who, delighted at the interest evinced by Miss Delamere in his schools, his almshouses, and his poor, had entreated Mrs. Mortimer to accompany his wife in her introductory visit.

That the strangers were affluent was sufficiently apparent; for, even while commencing the costly improvements upon which they had decided, the well-organized establishment already formed at The Grange prevented every appearance

of discomfort or disorder; and the superb furniture and articles of *vertù* scattered through the apartments, betokened long habits of elegance and even profusion.

The elder lady was, indeed, as Mrs. Mortimer had declared, a mere cypher. A little withered, peevish, faded woman of fashion, for whom it was always too hot or too cold; too early or too late. Who constantly kept a bottle of ether upon her reading table; enhanced, as far as was yet in her power, the ruins of her former beauty, by the use of rouge, and the adoption of cap-borders of costly meehlin; could only exist in the twilight of a well-curtained room, and willingly displayed her still faultless foot to the admiration of her visitors. She said little; and that little in a low, drawling, monotonous, and unmusical voice, which did not invite conversation; while on no single occasion did she ever exert herself to emit an opinion upon any subject whatever; contenting herself, in reply to every question or appeal, by languidly closing her eyes as she answered, "I really do not know; you had better inquire of Sybil."

And Sybil was never at fault. Let the theme be what it might, it failed to produce the hesitation of an instant.

It must not, however, be supposed that Miss Delamere assumed the attitude of an oracle, or exhibited towards her indolent parent the slightest tinge of disrespect or neglect. On the contrary, although she never appealed to her tastes, being an enemy to all works of supererogation, she never failed to consult her wishes, and to receive in reply the languid, "Pray don't disturb me, Sybil; I care nothing about it. Only please yourself." And in obedience to this injunction Sybil never hesitated to please herself, and frequently succeeded by the same means in pleasing others.

The evident affluence and high breeding of the strangers; the unembarrassed deportment of Miss Delamere; her indifference to all those inconvenient conventionalities by which unmarried females are generally fettered; her unlimited command of money, and her universal acquaintance with all popular and even abstruse subjects, rendered their past existence a problem to all the gentry of the neighbourhood, whose inferences and surmises were alike industrious and absurd.

This much, however, was evident. Mrs. Delamere was a woman thoroughly habituated to luxury, and that

dolce far niente which can only be commanded by wealth; while the younger lady, whose dark rich beauty was almost dazzling, was highly accomplished, occasionally even profound, in her remarks, with great knowledge of the world, and specious and winning manners; she was also cheerful, witty, and at times slightly sarcastic; with, moreover, that affected indifference to her own attractions, which is the most ineradicable and refined vanity, and which can never be successfully attained until a matured experience has enabled its possessor to check all impulsive demonstrations, and to let the head lead, where in youth it is the heart that plays the pioneer.

Such was Miss Delamere at eight-and-twenty; and such an apparition in a quiet country town was well calculated to excite alike curiosity and surprise. The splendour of her toilette—remarkable, however, only for the material and never for the exaggeration of its fashion—the perfect ease with which she drove her ponies through the crowded streets on market days, or galloped over the heights on her thorough-bred horse, followed only by a groom, or argued architectural details with the professional man employed to enlarge and embellish The Grange, or discussed points of logic, and even theology, with the vicar, or medicine and metaphysics with the elderly and respectable physician of Westrum, were all alike subject of marvel; but never, even in her most enthusiastic moments, did Miss Delamere throw a single light upon the past.

The Delameres established themselves at The Grange without a single introduction; and it was only the fact of their having, courteously enough, but very decidedly, caused it to be understood that they declined all acquaintance with the notabilities of the town, with the exception only of the incumbent and the physician, that inspired the “neighbourhood” with any confidence in their real grade in society.

In accordance with the request of the vicar, whose parochial interests were, as we have seen, involved in the concession, Mrs. Mortimer had consented to accompany his amiable and timid wife to The Grange; but, nevertheless, although the general respect and regard which was felt for the gentle widow made her example powerful,

it was still a moot question with the owners of this "Hall" and that "House" if they should venture to commit themselves by too ready an exhibition of goodwill towards persons of whose actual identity they were altogether uninformed.

This resolution, however, in no degree affected either the feelings or the energies of Miss Delamere. Her workmen toiled, her undertaking progressed, her conservatories were lined with the most costly plants; her fountains threw up their silver threads in the sunshine; her neat but exquisitely appointed chariot bore her periodically to her comfortably-curtained pew in the parish church; the London coach duly arrived, laden with boxes and packing-cases for her wardrobe; and she rode and drove, walked, and executed the most elaborate compositions upon her harp as tranquilly and with as much enjoyment as though all the magnates of the county had left their visiting-tickets at the porter's lodge.

It was evident that she could do without them, and this conviction, ere long, appeared all-sufficient as regarded her *right* to their civilities; and, accordingly, after a lapse of time, having satisfied themselves that the current expenses at The Grange were duly met, that the religious tenets of its new owners were orthodox, and that, come what might, Mrs. Mortimer would necessarily incur all the responsibility of the result, one by one the neighbouring families left their names at the door, not sorry to satisfy at once their curiosity and the tardily performed duty of courtesy.

One glance at the arrangements sufficed to convince them that everything had been ordered rather with a view to personal gratification than idle or presumptuous display; and, costly as all the accessories of the place undoubtedly were, they became reconciled to the innovation when their self-love was satisfied that no attack had been premeditatedly made upon it; while the quiet and undemonstrative manners of Mrs. Delamere reassured all the local fashionables among the matrons that they need not fear for themselves. It is true that the rouge was admirably laid on, and the shawls and mechlins of the lady almost unapproachable in value; but she wore

both the one and the other with such unmistakeable indifference, that it was at once evident they never occupied her thoughts.

The only stumbling-block was Sybil. The methodical and somewhat strait-laced dames of the county could not decide what to make of her.

Still they could find no tangible fault with Miss Delamere: her extreme beauty and her perfect good-breeding were admitted on all sides; and, as no particular individual had the moral courage to allow that this very excess of good-breeding had been a source of personal mortification, the result of the visit was declared to be satisfactory, although there was everywhere a mental reservation.

Thus, although every one praised the beauty and the deportment of Miss Delamere, she did not impress them favourably: fathers trembled for their sons, mothers for their daughters, young ladies for their lovers, and expectant heirs for their college recollections and forgotten studies.

In short, the ladies decided that the handsome stranger was a flirt, and empty-headed squirrelings that she was a blue-stocking.

CHAPTER III.

MEANWHILE Frederic Mortimer was hastily traversing Italy, on his way to England. The alarming news which reached him at Cairo reversed in a single instant all his plans; and it was with a throbbing and a trembling heart that he found, on arriving at Alexandria, only a single vessel lying in the harbour bound for Europe, and which, moreover, was not to sail for several days.

Those days were torture to the affectionate heart of Frederic; for, although the expressions of his careful mother had been measured, and she had abstained from informing him that all hope was over, still he read the truth in the constrained anguish which breathed throughout the whole letter.

At length the anchor of the small schooner was weighed, and, with a fair breeze, she scudded in the direction of Trieste, her solitary passenger being Frederic, who, after having taken leave of his travelling companion, then preparing for an expedition to the Pyramids, had become totally absorbed by the one mingled hope and fear which pointed towards his home.

A fortnight had elapsed since the bright noon upon which we introduced Mrs. Mortimer and her orphan niece to our readers, and the shades of evening were rapidly invading the glorious vapours which had marshalled the sun to its gorgeous setting, and which flooded the lawn with a golden light, as if reluctant to fade from the face of the fair earth so soon, when the gate-bell suddenly rang out.

"Aunt, dear aunt," exclaimed Gertrude, "I have a presentiment—nay, I feel convinced—that Frederic has arrived!"

Mrs. Mortimer sank back, half-fainting, in her chair; and waving her hand impatiently, in a hurried and failing voice desired the fair girl to hasten and ascertain if her conjecture were indeed correct; an exertion which her sudden emotion rendered impossible to herself.

The heart of Gertrude had not deceived her. As she reached the hall, a tall slight figure alighted from a travelling carriage, and hastily murmuring, "My dear cousin, I am rejoiced to see you once again! Where is my mother?" passed her without a second glance; and in the next instant had crossed the threshold of the saloon.

The partial obscurity of the hall, combined with her own agitation, had rendered it impossible for her to distinguish the features of her long absent cousin; while it was equally evident that he had at once comprehended the extent of his misfortune by the mourning dress in which she met him; and, engrossed by that solitary idea, had given no thought to herself. In vain did she argue to her own reason that nothing could be more natural than what had occurred; her heart was unsatisfied, that heart which had yearned towards him even from her girlhood. Had he merely touched her hand as he passed beside her, she would have asked no more, for she would then have felt that she had a place in his remembrance; but their first

meeting had been a perfect blank, and this conviction chilled her to the soul.

Meanwhile Frederic had flung himself upon the neck of his widowed mother, and for a few seconds was totally incapable of utterance. Throughout his whole journey he had hoped, even against hope; and he felt this truth bitterly as the extent of his misfortune was instantly revealed to him by the mourning dresses which now saddened his once cheerful home.

Fortunately for both parties, Mrs. Mortimer had already had time to look upon her bereavement with more resignation; and the presence of her son seemed for awhile to restore to her all the happiness that she had irrecoverably lost.

Two long hours had elapsed ere either remembered or remarked the absence of Gertrude; but the warm-hearted matron had no sooner done so, than, with her hand locked in that of Frederic, and her mild eyes earnestly fixed upon him, she began to dilate, in terms of the most grateful affection, upon the care and tenderness she had experienced from her niece, throughout not only her late heavy trial, but all the long years of his absence.

She said little of the beauty of her niece, for she was conscious that no eye could rest upon it with indifference; but she expatiated upon her high qualities of heart and mind, upon her enthusiastic and self-neglecting affection, and upon her artless frankness.

The eye of Frederic beamed with delight as he listened. It was even thus that his memory had pictured her; and he could not forbear the recollection as his mother spoke, that such anticipations are but too frequently disappointed.

"This is, indeed, a sincere joy to me," he said affectionately: "I have always dearly loved my pretty cousin, and I dreaded at times that on my return, I might find her changed by time into one of those cold automata so common in our correct and somewhat frigid England. I rejoice that this mortification is spared to me; and that I shall indeed meet once more the artless and frank playmate of my boyhood, changed only in person, but untouched in heart."

Mrs. Mortimer became radiant with happiness; and the very excess of her satisfaction determined the worthy lady

for once in her life to enact the diplomatist, and to withhold from her son the dying wishes of his father until the beauty and virtues of Gertrude had produced their effect; for, single-hearted as she was, she nevertheless knew enough of the waywardness of human nature to feel that it invariably shrinks from all that bears the appearance of compulsion; while the circumstances under which they now met were a sufficient excuse for the omission.

No more time was lost in summoning Gertrude; but, alas! that which had already elapsed more than sufficed to convince the orphan-girl of all the difficulties and all the dangers by which she was surrounded. Mrs. Mortimer had indeed taught herself mentally to overleap the years of separation, which had rendered the cousins almost strangers, to forget the change which had necessarily taken place in both, and the peculiar delicacy of her niece's position; but the more Gertrude reflected in the solitude of her own chamber, the more appallingly they rose up before her.

Had her fond but ill-judging aunt withheld from her, as she had now done from Frederic, the dying injunction of Mr. Mortimer, she believed that she could once more have met her cousin with comparative composure and unconcealed delight; but that fatal confidence had raised up a barrier between them which the shrinking and womanly pride of her nature forbade her to overpass.

The more she reflected upon the personal and moral merits of her cousin, the more she satisfied herself that it was impossible for him to have passed unloved, and consequently unloving, throughout five long and adventurous years; and her repugnance to force herself upon his, perhaps reluctant, affections became doubled by the conviction.

She did not for an instant apprehend that in the first rush of sorrowful tenderness, her partial aunt, (anxious as she was to secure her happiness by what she considered as the most simple and facile means,) would find a moment to confide to Frederic the secret which had been made known to herself; and she instinctively felt that, in order to work out her noble-minded and dignified purpose, not a moment must be lost in securing the silence of Mrs. Mortimer.

This was the last struggle; for Gertrude at once became

conscious, as she formed the resolution, that in thus flinging from her the only positive link between herself and her cousin, she was indeed leaving every thing to chance; while, unaccustomed to form even a fair estimate of her own attractions, she wept bitterly as she contrasted her probable influence over his affections with that of fifty other women whom he must have encountered abroad.

Long and very painful were those two hours of vigil to Gertrude; and it was full of the resolutions which she had formed with a strong conviction of right, and a firm determination to adhere to them, that she at length obeyed the summons of her aunt, after having bathed her eyes to hide all evidence of her tears, and smoothed down the disordered ringlets which fell over her pale cheeks.

When she entered the saloon she almost shrank as the bright light of the lamp, which had just been carried in, threw its broad glare upon her countenance; but in the next instant her cousin sprang towards her, and eagerly clasping her hands within his own, poured forth his thanks and his greeting.

As he drew her towards him, evidently with the intention of pressing his lips to hers, she instinctively felt that the moment was already come in which she must commence the exercise of her self-control; and even as she replied to his ardent words she turned aside her face, and the offered lips fell coldly on her cheek.

In his turn, Frederic felt his kindly impulses checked, and flung back upon him. "Pardon me," he said, as he released her hand; "I had forgotten for a moment, my dear cousin, that you are no longer a child. The heart is so apt to cling to the past; but you must forgive me." And as he looked earnestly at the beautiful girl who stood trembling and blushing before him, his voice became more tremulous as he added, "Indeed you must forgive me; I would not wilfully have offended you."

Mrs. Mortimer only smiled, for she saw in the assumed coldness of Gertrude simply the confusion natural to a young and timid woman suddenly brought into contact with a recognised lover; while in the expressive eyes of her son she read at once his surprise and his admiration; and this was precisely what she had hoped and expected.

Her satisfaction visibly diminished, however, as the evening wore on, and she discovered that, courteously, and even kindly, as her niece received all the attentions of Frederic, she betrayed no single symptom of affection. When he spoke she listened intently; when he addressed himself directly to her, she replied without trepidation or embarrassment; but her words were measured, and the faint smile which played about her lips was evidently forced.

In this frame of mind her beauty, even faultless as it was, lost half its charm; there was no light in her eye, no bloom upon her cheek, her very movements were constrained; and Mrs. Mortimer, grieved and disappointed, sought in vain for the solution of what to her was a painful mystery. Fortunately for all parties, the fatigue of the traveller formed a natural pretext for his retiring early to rest; and, impossible as she would only on the previous day have believed such a thing to be, the disappearance of her cousin was a relief to the overcharged heart of Gertrude, which bled in secret at the restraint self-imposed upon its best and holiest impulses.

CHAPTER IV.

From day to day Frederic saw additional reason more highly to admire and esteem his gentle cousin, but nothing to engage his affections. Always placid, willing, and even eager to conduce to his comfort and convenience, Gertrude was ice itself as regarded his feelings; her very smiles were chilling, and effectually checked his enthusiasm; and when her aunt compelled her to display her talents, and thus to enforce the praises of her cousin, she received them with an apparent apathy that sealed his lips, at the very instant in which he would fain have poured out his whole soul into her ear.

For a brief while Frederic struggled to awaken in the beautiful creature whom he felt that, would she permit it, he could worship with his whole heart, one spark of the hallowed fire that had been kindled in their early

years ; but after a time he began to accuse himself of vanity and cowardice, in thus seeking to compel an affection which shrank before his efforts.

Wearied, at length, by a pertinacity which at once discouraged his hopes and wounded his self-love, he resolved to leave the issue of his fate to time, and applied himself diligently to the business considerations entailed upon him by his succession to the family property. But even here he found little to occupy his thoughts. His accession to the estates of his father was a mere matter of legal form ; his mother's jointure was amply secured ; there were no debts, no difficulties ; his income greatly exceeded his anticipations, and his position in the county was at once insured and unexceptionable. His farms were flourishing, his tenants satisfied, no single cause for anxiety made a demand upon his mind ; his home was the abode of peace, his mother devoted and affectionate, and still he was not happy ; and perhaps the less so that he could not dwell upon one tangible annoyance.

The very calm of his existence was a trial, succeeding as it did, in the very bloom and buoyancy of his manhood, to the scenes of privation and excitement to which he had been for years habituated.

His hurried and engrossing foreign experience, while it had engaged and satisfied his mind, had left his heart unoccupied ; and that heart, in the calm interregnum afforded by his present mode of existence, put forth its claim in turn : the temple was prepared, the altar raised, but the divinity was still wanting.

How often did Mortimer feel inclined almost to curse the affluence which had descended upon him in a Danaën shower. How often did he detest himself, envying the fate of those who were called upon to wrestle with the world, and to exert all their moral and physical energies to secure one footing upon the slippery ladder where he saw himself enthroned midway without a single effort of his own. They, at least, had something to hope, something for which to strive ; an aim, an end to their being ; while he was a mere unit in the great sum total of the world, to whom a fixed position had been assigned, and who had no share in the common task that was going on about him.

Nothing is so easily wounded as self-love ; and, unconsciously to himself, Mortimer had depended upon the affection of his cousin. He remembered how often they had sat side by side under the same tree, engaged upon the same book, warmed by the same sunbeam ; and his heart had yearned in absence to renew those innocent and happy hours. It was to Gertrude that he had looked to relate to him in detail the last incidents of his father's life ; he could not enter upon such a subject with his widowed mother, and even the old and faithful servants of the family could give him but imperfect accounts of all that he pined to hear. It was also from Gertrude that he had anticipated the enthusiastic inquiries which travellers so love to answer ; but although she listened eagerly to the anecdotes elicited by the questions of her aunt, she had never once propounded one of her own. Beautiful as she was, he soon taught himself to believe that, despite his mother's encomiums, she had no soul, and that the lovely face before him was a mere mask, behind which all was void. Piqued far beyond what he suspected, he became cool and reserved in his turn. Unable to comprehend or suspect the extreme delicacy which had dictated her reserve, he comforted himself with the belief that where all was pure and estimable there could be nothing to conceal ; and that, consequently, the conduct of Gertrude was either the result of a coquettish affectation which it would be alike weak and unmanly to gratify, or, as we have already stated, a decided indifference, if not repugnance, to himself, which, much as it wounded his personal vanity, he was too proud to make one effort to overcome.

Had Frederic been more just to himself, he might soon have probed the innocent heart of his cousin to its very centre ; for there were moments when, with her whole soul hanging upon his words, and yearning for his sympathy, she would have willingly forgotten the barrier which she had herself raised between them, and flung herself upon his bosom, ready to pour out before him all the treasure of her long-hoarded affection ; but he did not look beyond the surface, he did not appreciate her timid apprehensions, and he misjudged her nature.

CHAPTER V.

THE Grange was a fine old place, with its sharp gables and pointed windows, and shady recesses, and deep shadowy arches, telling of centuries passed away, when architects cared little to calculate the surface that they covered, and indulged themselves freely in the fantasies of wide and winding passages, strange shapeless nooks, and staircases sufficiently ample to afford ingress to the baronial coach, as well as its occupant. None of the apartments were shaped like those of modern days; in each and all there was a niche or bay; the one to hold a statue, and the other to admit a group of flowering plants, or a musical instrument, or an easel; and the Delameres had not long been its tenants ere these recesses found their appropriate ornaments. Costly bronzes, rare works in alabaster or marble, a library of choice books, valuable rather from their nature than their number; a harp, a guitar, (at that period a scarce instrument in England,) tapestry frames, drawing tables, and all the elegant necessities of refined female existence, were lavishly but unobtrusively scattered over the reception rooms.

The result was admirable, and yet there was no appearance of vulgar stage effect. The effect of a master-hand was everywhere visible, and each article seemed indispensable where all was in harmony. The morning room was a triumph of taste, with its rich draperies of sea-green damask, and clouds of transparent white muslin, its Venetian carpet and mirrors, and its solitary statue of Parian marble, the production of a classic chisel; its luxurious couches and cushioned lounges; all only half revealed in the twilight which was permitted to invade the apartment, protected from the glare without by Italian jalousies and garlands of creeping shrubs.

The deity of this fair shrine was Sybil. It was here that she had placed her harp, her work-table, her writing-stand, and all the objects which conduced to her daily occupations; and it is here that we shall once more introduce her to our reader.

Miss Delamere was seated at her harp, but her fingers

wandered listlessly among the chords. Her brows were slightly drawn together, as if by intense, and it might be, anxious thought; but this rapt expression did not tend to decrease her extraordinary beauty. Her raven black hair, reflecting, as the light touched it, that matchless purple tint so rarely seen, was banded smoothly from her lofty forehead low upon her cheeks, and drawn into a luxuriant knot on the summit of her small and finely-shaped head. Her magnificent arms were revealed in all their beauty beneath the folds of soft muslin by which they were covered, and her small foot moved like a fairy thing among the pedals.

Half buried in a lounging chair, Mrs. Delamere had placed herself at the other extremity of the apartment, in deep shadow, with her ether bottle, her fan, and a volume of the last new novel beside her. She was not, however, either reading or thinking. Mrs. Delamere seldom read, and never thought. Both fatigued her; and Sybil read and thought enough, as she would have declared, had she possessed energy to do so, to exempt her from any such necessity.

They had been silent for a considerable time, when Miss Delamere suddenly raised her head; and throwing off, by an effort of will, every trace of the care which her features had worn only a moment back, asked, with a sunny smile, "And what thought you, mamma, of our new acquaintance, Mrs. Mortimer, and her niece?"

"I have never thought about them."

"Then do so now, I pray you. Is not the younger lady very beautiful?"

"Oh, yes, a blue-eyed girl. Was she pretty?"

"Very," said Sybil, with strong and somewhat bitter emphasis; "she has one of those faces which Guido would have loved to paint when he cinctured the brow of the Virgin with an aureole of angels."

"Ha!"

"There was soul in her eyes, too; and they were so intensely blue and limpid! They have haunted me ever since."

"Haunted you?"

"Yes; but in an evil spirit. I only love blue eyes on canvass. There is no strength of purpose in them. They

were made merely to look upon summer sunshine—storm and tempest would pale them. And yet—well, well! Perhaps it is better so. Men regard women simply as toys; and toys should break, or the grown children would weary of them. They were meant to make this old earth look new, and we must change our suits, or they would become threadbare.”

“And is all this *àpropos* of Miss—What is her name, did you say?”

“Mortimer.”

“Oh, yes. Is all this *àpropos* of Miss Mortimer’s eyes?”

“Yes, and no; but she is certainly very beautiful.”

“I am glad you think so.”

There was another tinge of bitterness in the light laugh with which Sybil greeted the congratulation; and it was somewhat impatiently that she thrust her harp from her as she rose, and approaching her mother, said, softly, “You will be able soon to test my taste, mamma, for we must return the visit to-day. We have already delayed the courtesy too long. Shall I order the barouche, or will you trust yourself to my ponies?”

“Sybil,” exclaimed Mrs. Delamere, with momentary energy, as she half rose from among her cushions, and raised her eyes to those of her daughter, “you know best, and I have no wish to interfere; but it seems to me that—Do you not know what I mean?—that we are spending a great deal of money.”

“We are so.”

“But really, my dear, can we do it?”

“We are doing it every day.”

“Yes, yes; I see—I know—However, it is your affair, not mine; only perhaps—”

“There must be no perhaps,” interposed Miss Delamere, and again the finely-pencilled brows were slightly contracted; “the season of ‘perhaps’ is past. Will you decide, my dear mother, in favour of the barouche, or the ponies?”

“Please yourself.”

“The ponies, then, assuredly,” said Sybil, as she approached the bell; “and their toilette will be accomplished as expeditiously as your own. Shall I ring for your maid?”

“Do so.”

And the bell was rung; and while Sybil reseated herself at the harp, the Abigail assisted the reluctant Mrs. Delamere to rise from her chair, folded her shawl more conveniently about her, collected the fan, the novel, and the ether-bottle, and finally followed her languid mistress from the room.

The door had no sooner closed behind them than the head of the brilliant beauty fell heavily upon the instrument, her fingers forsook the chords, and she became plunged in a deep and gloomy train of thought. Once or twice she turned her large eyes searchingly on every side, and on every side they rested upon some object of luxury or beauty; but there was no reflected happiness in their expression; the brow was smooth, but the crumpled rose-leaf had marred the repose of the spirit.

With Sybil, however, such a mood of mind could be but of short continuance. After a time she rose and walked calmly and slowly to a mirror, where she gazed earnestly at the reflection of her own beauty, until a haughty smile played about her lip, and the light returned to her eyes. There was resolute triumph in the whole expression of her face and attitude. At that moment she felt no regret that she had thrown down the gauntlet to fate, but was ready for the combat.

When the beautiful little pony carriage stopped at the gate of Mrs. Mortimer, the ladies were strolling about the grounds, and their visitors had already taken possession of the saloon, ere the bell recalled them to the house. Mrs. Delamere was, as usual, almost swathed in shawls; for, although she never ventured to declare so much, she detested an open carriage, and fancied that she was perished with cold even in the hottest season of the year, whenever she risked her health in so hazardous a manner. Her wraps were, nevertheless, upon this occasion trifling beside those of her daughter; who, in addition to a mantle so disguising that it might have served as a domino, had flung over her close bonnet a voluminous black veil which completely concealed her countenance. Nothing, in fact, save her height, and the peculiarly graceful nature of her movements, could have distinguished her from the veriest dowdy of the neighbourhood; nor, when Mrs. Mortimer and her

niece, closely followed by Frederic, entered the apartment, did she raise the cloud of lace beneath which she was literally in eclipse.

Mrs. Delamere soon sank, in a state of semi-exhaustion, into a chair; and her hostess, as a matter of course, established herself at her side. But even after the presentation of Mortimer, the three younger members of the party remained standing in the full glow of the mid-day sun, before the open doors of the verandah; and only a few moments had elapsed, ere, at the suggestion of Sybil, they wandered out into the open air.

"You have a true English home here, Miss Mortimer," she said caressingly, as she passed her arm through that of Gertrude; "such a home as I should value beyond all the pomp on earth. There is no trace of yesterday in these fine old trees, nor in the time-tint of the venerable house they so nobly overshadow. I have a horror of the architectural mushrooms which seem to be scarcely of an hour's growth."

"Yes," said Gertrude fondly; "it is a dear old place; and although our neighbours occasionally endeavour to alarm my aunt by adverting to the presumption of the little post-town which has all but invaded her territory, I believe that she estimates it at its full value."

"And she is right," replied Sybil. "I appeal to Mr. Mortimer," she added, turning her graceful head abruptly towards Frederic, who was walking at her side; "he has travelled, and must feel and appreciate all the charm of such a home as this."

"I trust that I am not insensible to its value, nor to that of its inmates," said the young man, with a slight bow; "and still less should I feel inclined to question its merits, did we often receive such guests as Miss Delamere; but I nevertheless confess that there are moments when I should scarcely regret to feel it placed somewhat nearer to the centre of mind and movement."

The expression of Sybil's countenance was invisible beneath her veil, but she *felt* the sigh of the fair girl upon whose arm she leant; and she had already seized the text of a long and earnest chapter, which no stranger had a right to read.

"How well I recognise the spirit of your exacting sex in that measured answer!" she said playfully. "The poet has assured us that 'man never is, but always to be blessed;' how much happier are we humble-minded women! Is it not so, Miss Mortimer?"

"This from you!" exclaimed Gertrude with unfeigned surprise. "You, who appear to rule circumstances with a wand of ivory, and to make all obey your bidding?"

"You do not speak in epigrams, I trust," was the retort of Sybil; "reassure me on the instant, or you will frighten me. My rule, believe me, does not extend beyond builders and gardeners, and I find even these difficult to govern. Remember that my mother is out of health, that her energies are ruined, and that she requires one who can think and act for her; and that one must and should be her own child."

"My dear Miss Delamere—"

"Do not mistake me once more," pursued Sybil, as she clasped the slender fingers of her companion in her own; "you did not intend to wound me, nor have you done so; but I feel that I shall greatly prize your friendship, and I am anxious to put forth my claim frankly. The power which is wielded at The Grange is not mine; it has, if you will permit me so to say, a more vulgar origin; it is the mere power of gold, and I am simply the 'slave of the lamp;' a little vain, perhaps, occasionally, of the results of my agency, but scarcely to be considered as their author. All this is sad egotism, however, and will but increase the threatened tedium of Mr. Mortimer, who has so lately been conversant only with the grand and the beautiful; let us rather delude him into some bright memories of the past, and throw him back for a brief interval into the world of wonders and adventure."

"I begin to believe that it exists everywhere," said Frederic, fascinated, he scarcely knew wherefore, by the perfect self-possession and candour of the visitor.

"No doubt it does," acquiesced Miss Delamere, while Gertrude was fairly silenced, alike by the stream of words which she had encountered on the one hand, and by the effect which they evidently produced upon the other. But let us talk of Italy, Mr. Mortimer—beauti-

ful Italy!—where I once spent two happy years. What a spell exists in the very name of Italy! It is a dream for the dying.”

And they spoke of Italy, long and earnestly: but Frederic soon unconsciously felt his self-love somewhat piqued by the discovery that he had much to learn and nothing to teach to his companion upon his favourite subject. The soft eyes of Gertrude were upon him, but their admiring gaze was wasted. It was not upon his cold and reserved cousin that he had been anxious to make a favourable impression; he had aimed at interesting, and perhaps attracting, Miss Delamere, and he began to believe that he had failed.

Sybil, however, read the expression of his speaking features as readily as she would have perused the pages of a printed volume, and by an easy transition she led the conversation to the marvels and monuments of Egypt, a land which she had never visited; and, having once more succeeded in arousing the enthusiasm of Frederic, she immediately became all ear: encouraged his narrative by eager and well-placed inquiries, and made him, with consummate tact, the hero of the hour. To Mortimer she had appeared delightful when she talked; no wonder, then, that, when she hung upon his words like one entranced, he should consider her tenfold more charming; and that, as they moved slowly forward, and he remarked the finished and yet unstudied grace of all her movements, and the high-bred dignity of her gestures, he should put forth all his powers of mind and manner to secure her favour, and to enhance his merits in her eyes.

There was a tormenting mystery, too, in the thick and heavy veil, which added to the charm of the interview. He could only imagine the play of the intelligent features that it concealed, and he felt like one under the influence of a wild and delicious dream.

When they re-entered the saloon they found Mrs. Delamere languidly admiring a magnificent piece of unfinished tapestry-work, which her hostess was courteously exhibiting, with the amiable hope of amusing her unamusable guest; and the animated and judicious admiration of Sybil, who instantly joined their party, soon made

ample amends for the languid and evidently extorted encomiums of her half-sleepy mother. Her knowledge of the different effects of startling contrasts and delicate gradation of tints, was not less astonishing to Frederic than the intimate acquaintance which she had betrayed in their previous conversation with the merits of different schools of art and works of science; and a feeling of sincere gratification took possession of his mind as he noticed the sudden animation of delight which lighted up the fair face of Gertrude as she saw the laborious industry and taste of her aunt thus estimated at its real value. Nor was he less pleased and surprised at the promptitude with which Sybil, even interested as she was by the society of her new friends, obeyed the signal of her mother, and prepared to take her leave.

Hands were shaken, and courteous words exchanged; and when the languid valetudinarian had at length succeeded in reaching the hall-door, leaning listlessly upon the arm of Mortimer, Sybil sprang lightly into the fairy vehicle, possessed herself of the reins, and then, having almost succeeded in convincing her companion that she was comfortably established among her wraps, threw back her heavy veil for an instant, and turned her dark and splendid eyes full upon Frederic with an expression of interest and acknowledgment which for an instant fairly dazzled him. The next moment, however, the jealous cloud of lace fell back; a graceful bend intimated a final leave-taking, and the beautiful ponies were in motion towards The Grange.

They were fairly out of sight ere Mortimer changed his position; and even when he at length did so, instead of returning to the house, he descended the steps and wandered once more into the grounds. He had ample food for reflection. On his arrival at home he had been heart whole, and prepared to expend all his affections upon its beloved inhabitants. Short as his period of sojourn beneath his ancestral roof had been he had become wearied of its monotony, and discouraged by the indifference of the very being whose memory he had cherished the most fondly; and yet he remembered that this cold beauty was to be his wife. Such was the will of a father whom he had never opposed during his life, and whom he

believed it to be still more impossible to disobey after his death, when his every wish was doubly hallowed by the fact that it could no longer be enforced.

Only on the previous day—nay, even an hour back—he felt that he could have submitted to his fate without a murmur. That last hour had, however, worked a strange revolution in his whole nature. He had, at length, seen the very being for whom his soul had pined in moments of reflection—the very being whom he had hoped to find in his orphan-cousin—a creature not only beautiful but beaming with intellect; eager and enthusiastic in feeling; full of that light of the soul which diffuses its own radiance over all around it; charming without any visible effort to attract, fascinating without affectation, and graceful without mannerism, with a mind richly stored, and a gentleness essentially feminine.

What evil star, he asked himself, had brought the radiant Sybil across his path? What wretched chance had induced her to immure her mental and personal loveliness in that retired spot, as if to plunge him into a trial, perchance too mighty for his strength? Why were they ever fated to meet, when he was fettered by an obligation through which it was impossible to break? And then another thought, scarcely less painful to his mind, and still more so to his pride, beset him. Had he not failed to gain the affections of his less-gifted cousin? And was it therefore probable that the dazzling being who now occupied his thoughts would prove more indulgent than one who had known and loved him in former years?

The doubt was rational enough, and yet, strange to say, Frederic, in his inmost soul, scarcely doubted: he felt that Sybil at least could understand him; her many words, and her one look, had convinced him that she did so; and he clung to the conviction despite his better reason. He could only resolve to avoid her, and thus to weaken her spell; but he forgot that this was by no means easy in a neighbourhood limited in its society and dependent upon its own resources.

Nevertheless, such was his determination; and then, as a commencement of his task, he compelled himself to dwell upon the image of Gertrude—of his destined wife

—and he recalled, with something approaching to happiness, her beaming look when she saw the pleasure evinced by her aunt at the encomiums lavished by Miss Delamere upon her tapestry. But, alas! even this slight gratification brought with it the image of Sybil; and he felt that hers was, indeed, no mean praise, and that his mother might well be excused for appreciating such testimony to her taste.

No marvel was it, therefore, that Mortimer finally returned to the house even more dispirited than he had left it.

CHAPTER VI.

As time wore on, and the natural grief of Mrs. Mortimer grew less acute, her desire to see her son the husband of his cousin became more importunate. He had attained the age at which she believed that men are calculated to make at once the most happy and the most prudent of husbands. At five-and-twenty her own lamented partner had led her to the altar, and her whole life, until she became a widow, had been one interval of happiness—a fact which had alone been sufficient to convince her guileless and unsuspicious mind of a truth which she never sought to question. Perfectly unconscious, therefore, that she was driving the iron still deeper into his heart, she never found herself alone with Frederic but, by some exertion of feminine tact, she led the conversation, whatever might be its original purport, to the subject of marriage; and even became eloquent as she enlarged upon it.

And, meanwhile, the intercourse of the two families insensibly increased and grew to intimacy. Mrs. Mortimer was half won over to like Sybil by the admiration and affection which she evinced for Gertrude, while Frederic only appreciated the more highly a character so superior as to place her above common and womanish rivalry, as she expatiated to himself upon the perfections of his cousin.

“You are, indeed, an enviable person, Mr. Mortimer,”

she said, with a sweet smile, as they were one day professing to make a survey of the improvements at The Grange; "nothing can be more faultless than the beauty of that lovely girl—no cameo ever presented a more perfect outline than her exquisite features; and she is so gentle, so essentially feminine; her disposition is so placid, and her manners are so mild, that it will in truth be a privilege to lead such a being in safety and happiness through life."

"Her empire will be home," said Frederic, compelling himself to reply.

"And where should it be?" asked Miss Delamere, earnestly. "What should a woman aspire to beyond that? All else, believe me, is mere delusion for our sex. Where the heart is, there alone should the energies be exerted; and be the home a palace or a cottage it will suffice. Men will never understand us—they think us light, trifling, and capricious; they cannot sound the depth of a true woman's heart."

"And yet," remarked Mortimer, as for an instant he glanced into the beaming countenance before him, "you have not ventured beyond mere theory in your own person."

"Oh, I!" said Miss Delamere, with a forced laugh, "I am altogether *hors-de-combat*. I am contented with my fate, and satisfied to remain a spectator of the events which progress around me. Persons attract me occasionally, and I am thankful for the variety which such prepossessions afford; but I have learned to estimate all preferences at their true value, and am quite aware that what appears very desirable and delightful to-day incurs a great risk of proving tedious a year hence."

"You argue with the coolness of a philosopher."

"And you, like all your sex, have a contempt for petticoat philosophy, is it not so? Nevertheless, you may be forgiven. *Your* happiness is assured, and you are not called upon to resist."

"If you assume such a position I cannot discuss the point."

"Why should you seek to do so? Where no struggle is required no victory is needed."

"May I not say of you what was said of the favoured ones of old, that 'the gods have you in their keeping?'"

"And your own star?" asked Frederic, in a tone of slight pique.

"Mine!" replied Sybil, with another of those ambiguous laughs which from her lips were always musical, even while it was not easy to detect their actual inspiration, "I doubt if any one of the luminous bodies has condescended to adopt the care of my destiny it has been so essentially commonplace. I am, however, fortunately satisfied, as I have already told you, to be a looker-on."

"And you have never loved; you, who could and should love well and deeply?"

Sybil turned aside for an instant in silence, and wrenched away the branch of a flowering shrub, near which they were passing, as if by this action to throw off some painful and powerful feeling: apparently she succeeded; for, in the next instant her voice was almost steady, as she replied,

"I may have done so; and now, like a wrecked merchant, only cling the closer to the security of land. None can warn more fittingly than those who have suffered."

Mortimer breathed quickly. She had loved, then, and she was still Miss Delamere; although, from the very self-possession which she had so nobly assumed, it was evident that she had not escaped unscathed. He forgot Gertrude—he forgot his father's dying request—he forgot, in short, all save the radiant creature beside him, as he asked, impetuously—

"And, having loved once, although unhappily, can you be now contented to live on like the dull crowd about you? Do you not—"

"No," said Sybil, laying her hand lightly upon his arm, and glancing, with an arch smile into his face, "No; for, trust me, I know well what you would ask. Women of my stamp permitted *once* to prostrate their best feelings before those of another—generally profit by the experience, and obtain a firmer power over their own susceptibilities; and this done, even if they do not secure happiness, they at least exhibit a counterfeit, which passes current as readily in the world."

"I do not comprehend such a compromise," said Frederic, somewhat coldly; "I have a different notion of 'the uses of adversity.'"

"Would you, then, trail your crape over the kennels of

the world?" asked Miss Delamere, with a slight accent of scorn; "believe me, the dear friends about us have little real sympathy with any sorrow which leaves themselves unscathed; nor do I see the wisdom of nursing regret where we have only to reassert our dignity, and to profit by our experience."

"And am I to understand that you have attained to this privilege?" asked Mortimer, with growing uneasiness.

"I hope so; but as this species of philosophy is not, as I am well aware, to be acquired at once, I do not expect to make you a convert. Nevertheless, I cannot afford to allow you to quarrel with my tenets because you are the pupil of a more romantic school. So much is required on both sides to render a married life really happy, that it is almost presumptuous to seek an exception in one's own particular case; there should be such perfect conformity of tastes, feelings, and principles, such power of self-abnegation, such entire and absolute devotion to another; and, above all, such a faculty of loving, through weal and woe, that I have renounced all hope of ever meeting one who would care to incur so great a risk for my sake."

"*You* despair of such a result?"

"Even so; and am I so much to blame?" she asked with a winning smile, "and may I not trust that you will acquit me of cold-heartedness and egotism if I have taught myself to appreciate the world as it is, and to receive with gratitude the calmer enjoyments which it tenders to me, without exacting more? In short, will you apply to me in your heart all those injurious epithets with which your sex generally overwhelm a woman, who, having attained years of discretion and reflection, still remains free, and declares her resolution to continue so?"

"No," murmured Frederic, nevertheless only half convinced, "but I hold that the man who is able to induce you to recant that resolution will be the happiest of mortals."

Sybil laughed, and placing her slender finger upon her lip, archly shook her head. "And now," she said sportively, "we must never again recur to this subject. You are affianced to your cousin morally, therefore, a married man—and I to my principles. Let us rather talk of your sweet bride elect, who needs but your guiding and support-

ing hand to become all that you can desire to see her. Were she nothing better than a beauty, it is a theme which, conversant as I have now become with your ardent nature, I should dread to touch upon; but such is far from being the case; she is full of pleasant womanly feelings and acquirements, and altogether qualified to make your home happy."

"You have studied her merits deeply," said Mortimer, somewhat sarcastically.

"Was it not natural that I should do so? Mrs. Mortimer was the first of our county neighbours who ventured within our anchorage without demanding a clean bill of health. You were yourself the first year which with whom I was brought into contact after my arrival, some of whom I had a taste, a pursuit, or a study in led; for, while Gertrude was pointed out to me as you she reputed wife. Do you wonder, then, that I looked some like closely into her character when I felt that it involved my happiness? But no—no—" she pursued, hurriedly, as she averted her head and quickened her pace, "I have expressed myself ill, unfortunately—I should have said—"

"Nothing save the very words you uttered!" exclaimed Frederic, breathlessly. "You have admitted that you honour me with some portion of your interest, and believe me that I will study to deserve it."

From that moment, however, Miss Delamere resolutely turned the subject of discourse, nor could all the artifices of Frederic induce her to resume it. Enough had nevertheless passed between them to convince Sybil that Mortimer was utterly indifferent to his cousin, and by no means equally so to herself; while Frederic quitted her presence with the proud conviction, that although Miss Delamere had resolved never to give away her heart, she at least bestowed her regard upon himself. The conviction came at a fortunate period to heal the wounds of his self-love, and he ingenuously believed that his own feeling towards the beautiful Sybil was of a similar nature, but he did not estimate the perils of the trial to which he thus recklessly abandoned his peace of mind.

The society of Sybil became daily more necessary to Mortimer. He no longer looked upon her as a mere acquaintance, with whom it was occasionally pleasant to

while away an idle hour; but even in her absence he constantly referred to her tastes and opinions, and coupled her image with all his pursuits. When he accidentally recalled to recollection an unusually interesting incident of travel, he reserved it until he could relate it to Miss Delamere; and if, in the course of his reading, he was struck by an able passage, or a quaint conceit, it was forthwith marked, in order that it might be submitted to her judgment, or made conducive to her amusement; while she no sooner appeared than he instantly roused himself from the languor which was rapidly becoming habitual to him, and exerted himself to do justice to his natural and acquired powers of mind.

And day by day, meanwhile, one sat beside him who was equally able to appreciate these efforts, but who felt that they were made for another. Delighted to see her son gratified and amused, Mrs. Mortimer increased in courtesy and attention to the inmates of The Grange, never dreaming that the matured and decided beauty of Sybil could bear comparison with the unobtrusive loveliness of her gentle niece, and consequently far from suspecting that she was aiding and abetting in the downfall of her own visions: but Gertrude was more clear-sighted.

Vainly, however, did she watch for any answering demonstrations from Miss Delamere. Sybil remembered her conversation with Mortimer, and although fully conscious of the empire which she had attained over his mind and heart, she never permitted its repetition. To all appearance she had, indeed, forgotten the circumstance, for she did not shun the intimacy which Frederic was so anxious to establish, but rather assumed towards him the bearing of an elder sister, desirous to enlarge his tastes, and to diminish his enthusiasm. Nevertheless, it was certain that, although she might succeed in the former attempt, she produced no effect in the latter, for Mortimer was not the pupil calculated to grow calmer under the teaching of such a preceptress, and thus Gertrude remained a melancholy spectator of gaiety in which she was not called upon to share, and an attachment which she was not supposed to comprehend.

And yet, what would she not have given for one of

those ardent looks, one of those heart-inspired tones! A year of life? Pshaw! what was a year of life to her, who, young as she was, had already begun to feel how dreary a boon existence may become when coupled with disappointment? At times she asked herself what she had done to merit such a fate; but although she felt tempted to reproach her cousin for having so thoroughly misjudged her, never for an instant did her generous nature include in its transient bitterness the syren who had beguiled his affections. All that had taken place appeared, on the contrary, so natural, that as she gazed in admiring sadness upon the radiant woman with whom she had thus unfortunately been brought into collision, she felt at once humbled and disheartened; and although she believed that she could love—that she *aid* love—as well as Sybil, she shrank from every other comparison between them.

CHAPTER VII.

AND, meanwhile, the passion of Frederic for Miss Delamere increased hourly; and scarcely a day passed in which he did not find or invent some pretext for a visit to The Grange. He was himself unconscious of the extent to which he had become enthralled. Never once had the idea of declining the hand of his cousin crossed his imagination; in fact, he rarely thought upon the subject; and when he chanced to do so it was calmly and without repugnance, as an arrangement sufficiently remote to present no immediate impediment to his tastes and pursuits. Fully impressed with the conviction, that the event was one of at least equal indifference to Gertrude, he regarded it simply as he did every other question of duty and expediency; determined to act correctly and uprightly when the time should come, without troubling himself by speculating upon its probable consequences, either to his own happiness or that of his cousin. Doing full justice to the virtues and amiability of his future wife, he was satisfied that his married exist-

ence would be at least calm and honourable, and he believed that he should be able to render hers equally so, but beyond this faith he did not venture to trust himself. He felt convinced that they should never understand each other, and he endeavoured to forget a necessity from which he made no effort to escape.

Moreover, Miss Delamere had frankly declared her resolution never to marry, and consequently their familiar intercourse was equally unimportant on both sides, while it was a perpetual source of gratification to each party.

Fascinated as he was, Frederic no longer possessed a sufficiently unbiassed judgment to reflect upon the extreme singularity, if not indelicacy, of the covert confidence made to him by Sybil. He did not pause to remember that such intimate disclosures are very rarely volunteered by an unmarried woman to an acquaintance of the opposite sex, and never until long and tried friendship has removed the impropriety of such a communication.

Several months passed on thus, and each succeeding week Mortimer spent less and less time at home, while he generally so contrived that when he was himself there, Mrs. and Miss Delamere should also be its inmates. No party of pleasure was complete without them; no evening circle brilliant in which they were not included; and while he found a particular *fauteuil*, in which the languid mother was brought to confess that she was really as comfortably established as in her own, the tables of Mrs. Mortimer were constantly decorated with clusters of beautiful exotics gracefully presented by the attentive daughter.

Frederic was tenderly attached to his mother, and these delicate courtesies were therefore duly appreciated by him. But at length they awakened the anxiety of the very mind which they were intended to tranquillize; and even when Sybil relieved her at her tapestry-frame, and with marvellous skill wrought out the most charming and complicated fancies, investing the very labours of the needle with the poetry which she dispensed over all she touched, Mrs. Mortimer began to ask herself if these unwearied endeavours to please and to oblige were really

exerted solely for her own sake, and ere long she felt the answer to be doubtful and unsatisfactory.

She remarked too, that when, on rare occasions, Gertrude made an attempt to conquer her depression, and to put forth her innate powers of conversation, although Sybil might have been pensive and absorbed a moment previously, she immediately flung off her momentary reserve; and with a wit which, like Aaron's rod, absorbed that of all around her, speedily repossessed herself of the attention of the whole circle.

From day to day Mrs. Mortimer reflected more seriously upon all these circumstances, and the result of her cogitations was a determination to lose no more time in recalling to the memory of Frederic his actual position as regarded his cousin. Satisfied that Gertrude, whom she loved as a daughter, was strongly attached to her son, she felt that she could not suffer her happiness to be made the sport of one whom she began to suspect of an unworthy but not the less dangerous coquetry; and, believing that the evil had as yet made too little progress to render her task one of much difficulty, she consequently felt less repugnance than she otherwise would have done in representing to Frederic the painful results which might ultimately accrue from his present unguarded system of conduct.

Accordingly as he one morning entered the library where she was engaged in writing, with his hat and gloves in his hand, and evidently about to leave the house, she looked up from her desk, and inquired with a forced smile if he were again about to absent himself for the day?

"I think not, my dear mother," he replied, somewhat confusedly, and with evident anxiety to escape; "I am only going to canter over to The Grange to inquire for Mrs. Delamere, who was somewhat indisposed when I returned last night; and should she not feel better to-day it is improbable that she will wish for visitors."

"In which case, shall we really see you again in an hour or two, my dear boy? Gertrude and I promised ourselves such delightful mornings when you should be restored to us, that we are almost inclined to feel mortified by your continual desertion."

"Do you indeed miss me so much, then?" asked Frederic, affectionately, as he laid down his hat, and drew a chair to the side of his mother. As to my cousin, I have long had proof that neither my presence nor my absence can affect her equanimity, and, consequently, deemed no apology necessary in her case; but to yourself, my dear mother, if, indeed, my wanderings tend to diminish your happiness, I cannot offer too many."

"Of late, my dear boy," said Mrs. Mortimer, with something which sounded like a sigh, "I have had so few opportunities of conversing confidentially with you, that if you can indeed spare me half an hour, I would ask you to defer your visit until I have spoken to you upon a subject in which all my best feelings are interested. You consent? Then, Frederic, I will venture to remind you that you are now more than five-and-twenty, and that it is my dearest wish to see you married, and to find myself surrounded by new and attaching ties before I am called upon to leave this world. I have, as you may remember, already spoken to you upon the same subject, but I now repeat my entreaty most earnestly; nor do I fear that I shall do so in vain."

She paused, but Mortimer continued silent.

"You have assured me," she pursued, after a time, "that you formed no attachment while abroad, but that you brought back to us the same pure and affectionate heart with which you departed; and I believed you, for you had never deceived me. You may, therefore, judge of my joy upon receiving this assurance, for your happiness has ever been the chief aim of my existence. You loved your cousin, young as you were, even before your departure; while to Gertrude you were already more dear than any one else on earth. I took care, my dear boy, to foster and encourage that affection, for I knew your nature too well to fear either caprice or fickleness on your part. My efforts were, however, unnecessary. Her love for you grew with her growth: she has sat for hours at my feet, listening to my speculations and hopes, and mingling her old memories with mine. When I hinted at the dangers to which you were exposed, she stopped me with her tears; and when I talked of the blessedness of your return she was radiant with delight.

Trust me, a woman can always read a woman's heart; while the task was doubly easy to one who, like myself, felt a twofold interest in the investigation."

Still Mortimer listened in silence.

"I was aware, however," continued his mother, resolutely, "that even the love of such a heart as hers would not suffice alone to married happiness. For your sake, therefore, my dear boy, as well as for her own, I studied to make her all that was estimable both in mind and heart, and richly have I succeeded: the beauty of her person, faultless as it is, does not exceed that of her character. She is portionless, it is true; but she is your uncle's child, and you do not, happily, require any increase of fortune; while it is certain that you can nowhere find a wife more richly endowed with personal charms, mental qualities, or moral virtues."

"I admit the fact willingly," said Frederic, with a pale lip, and an uncertain tremour in his voice, for the words and manner of his mother had enabled him, in a few seconds, to see further into the real depths of his heart than he had ever before done, and convinced him that he had been indulging a wilful and dangerous self-delusion. "Far be it from me to depreciate in the slightest degree the merits and virtues of my cousin, and yet I fear that I could never secure her happiness; and our dispositions and habits are utterly incompatible. She is too meek, too retiring, and you must forgive me if I say also too unimpassioned to satisfy my exacting tastes. My impetuosity would scare her—my enthusiasm irritate her feelings—my defects become insupportable to her. In fact, my dear mother, Gertrude is too perfect; her very placidity would chill me into stone; and thus we should become a perpetual torment to each other."

"You do not judge your cousin fairly, Frederic," said Mrs. Mortimer, with increased seriousness, more and more convinced that her suspicions had not misled her; "you make no allowance for the peculiarity of her position, and you fail to recollect that you have made no effort to diminish its difficulty. It is true that she has not attempted to compel your affection, deeply as she would have prized it, for Gertrude is incapable of every-

thing unwomanly ; but surely you would not construe her delicacy into a crime ? Are her meekness and retiring modesty indeed defects in your eyes ? Gertrude has not, I admit, been educated for the world, but, as I fondly hoped, for a better and a purer destiny."

"And I trust that she will yet fulfil her fate," said Frederic, with a sigh. "There are many far worthier than myself who will and must appreciate her many estimable qualities, and whom she may, perhaps, love ; while I repeat my conviction, that she feels nothing more than a sisterly affection for myself, and I confess that I have an utter abhorrence of all marriages of expediency."

Poor Mrs. Mortimer, exhausted by an effort at opposition so contrary to her nature, and depressed by a disappointment for which she had been totally unprepared, could no longer restrain her tears, which fell fast in silence until they were remarked by her son, who, instantly subdued by the sight of a sorrow of which he was himself the cause, hastened to entreat her, for his sake, to compose herself, declaring that he was ready to obey her wishes in all things.

As he uttered this assurance, however, the heart of Frederic sank within him, and he felt as though a cloud had settled upon the future. Now, indeed, he became aware of the empire which Sybil had acquired over his whole being. She never might have consented to rescind her resolution, and to become his wife ; but he could at least have lived on in hope—lived on, as he in truth had done for the last few months, scarcely caring to ask anything of to-morrow, but rich in all the happiness of to-day.

"It never could be my wish to urge you to any act repulsive to your own feelings, my dear boy," said Mrs. Mortimer, as she wiped away the large drops which were still coursing each other down her cheeks, "but for many reasons I felt it my duty to be frank with you, and even to press you upon this subject. Your father's dying entreaty, your cousin's devoted affection, and the perseverance with which I myself nourished that girlish love until I felt that it had become a principle of her existence, all determined me to the course I have pursued ; but compulsion in such a case is, of course, unna-

tural and impossible. You are free to act as you see fit, only I beseech you to divest yourself of the erroneous belief that your own indifference to your cousin is returned by her. Would that it indeed were so!"

"I will not disappoint your affection, my beloved mother," said Frederic, as he rose. "In obtaining the hand of a woman like my cousin, I ought to feel happy; and when you inform her that I will make it my study to deserve her affection, she will, perhaps, not scruple to admit it, since you assure me that such a feeling indeed exists." And, pressing his lips to the forehead of his agitated companion, he hastily left the room.

Mrs. Mortimer no sooner found herself alone than she gave free vent to the grief which she had hitherto vainly endeavoured to suppress. She could not conceal from her own heart that the concession of her son had been wrung from him entirely by his affection for herself, and she began to doubt in how far she would be justified in accepting it. Then, however, the vision of Sybil rose before her, and she almost shuddered as she thought of the power which this showy and mysterious stranger had acquired over the mind and feelings of Frederic.

The more she reflected the less did she find herself able to bring any definite or tangible accusation against her; but, nevertheless, there was a vague and undefined feeling of her unworthiness and craft which *would* obtrude itself, and a thousand petty occurrences flashed upon her memory, all tending to strengthen the impression; while, as she recurred to the original distaste which she had experienced towards Miss Delamere from the very moment of their introduction, she became almost superstitious in her belief that it had been a warning to avoid her acquaintance, and she felt tempted to visit upon herself all the blame of her present trial.

That her idolized son should become the husband of a heartless manœuvrer was a dread so bitter, that she could not reflect upon it without the keenest suffering; and that this would inevitably be the case should she reject the promise which she had so lately and with so much difficulty extorted from him, she felt fatally convinced.

Thus reassured, Mrs. Mortimer became gradually con-

soled; and, convinced that she was insuring at once the happiness of her son and that of his cousin, she closed her desk and proceeded to the morning-room, where Gertrude was busily engaged in arranging fresh flowers upon a stand near the window, in order to communicate to her the message of her now declared lover.

Perhaps the gentle girl intuitively felt that such a tale would have been more fitly told by Frederic himself. Certain it is that, for all reply, she only murmured, as she flung herself in a passion of tears into the arms of Mrs. Mortimer, "But, my dear, dear aunt, do you think that he *really* loves me?"

CHAPTER VIII.

MEANWHILE Frederic, dissatisfied with himself, and conscious of the unmanly fickleness which he had betrayed, forgot for a brief time even the bitterness of his disappointment in the humiliation of his self-accusations. But his whole nature had become changed since his acquaintance with Sybil. The indignant blood would have rushed to his brow, and the thirst of vengeance to his heart, had any lip breathed an insinuation against his honour; and yet he was about to commit the twofold treachery of offering his hand to a woman whom he did not love, and of confessing his repugnance to this union to another whom he felt to be, in point of fact, her rival. Even his once devoted affection for his mother had been weakened by a more engrossing attachment. He no longer made her happiness his first and dearest care; there was but one bright point in the horizon of his existence, and all around it had become dimmed and faint.

And thus he slowly rode away from that home which had ceased to be to him what it once was; and from the two beings who loved him better than aught else on earth, heedless of the new wound which this untimely desertion must inflict on both, and intent only upon justifying himself in the eyes of one who had suddenly superseded them in his affections.

When he at length reached the lodge, the first object which met his eyes was Sybil ; Sybil, in all her beauty, lingering upon a spot whence she could command the road by which he must arrive, and evidently awaiting his appearance. Never had she looked more radiant ; a light danced in her deep eyes as she detected his presence, a slight flush rose to her cheek, and there was an earnest welcome in the gesture with which she invited him to alight and join her. In an instant Frederic sprang to the ground, flung the bridle-rein to his groom, and, drawing the arm of his fair hostess through his own, was hidden with her in the leafy depths of the shrubbery. The indisposition of Mrs. Delamere was alike forgotten by both ; Sybil was full of reproaches on his unwonted tardiness, which had, as she declared, interfered most disagreeably with her day's arrangements, in which she had very inconsiderately, as it had now proved, done him the honour to include him ; while Mortimer was oppressed by a remembrance of the communication which he was about to make.

It was strange that, with a perfect faith in the sincerity of Miss Delamere's declaration, that he could never be to her more than a valued friend, he should nevertheless find a difficulty in entering upon his task ; but the human mind is a complicated machine, over which its owner sometimes lacks control ; and thus Frederic strove to smile at the sallies, and to appear interested in the sportive rebukes of his beautiful companion.

"Nevertheless," continued Miss Delamere, when she at length saw fit to conclude her smiling reproaches ; "the lost time may yet be redeemed in this instance—a rare case, you must admit, Mr. Mortimer ; and one which seldom occurs in life, where a past folly can hope no better result than a long repentance, and therefore I will inform you, without further delay, that mamma—who, *par parenthèse*, is much better this morning—has consented to accompany me to the Hartwell ruins. How say you ? Will you be our escort, or rather, I should have said, our cicerone, for to you they must be old acquaintance ? We are, as you know, mere novices in the neighbourhood, and need a guiding hand ; therefore it will be an act and office of courteous charity for which we shall, individually and collectively, be duly grateful."

"You are aware that I am only too happy to obey your orders, be they what they may," said Frederic with unaccustomed gravity.

"Yes, yes," laughed Miss Delamere, "I well know that you are a very model of knightly virtue; but still I may be permitted to suggest that you might have accepted this challenge with somewhat less of the 'woeful countenance.' Believe me, that its result will be even more innoxious than that of the windmills."

"Would that I shared the conviction!" said Frederic with increased melancholy; "but, listen to me for one moment, while I tell you that my appearance here to-day is less a pleasure than a duty; and believe, in your turn, that there is no discourtesy in such an admission. You know but too well, that for months past my only hours of perfect happiness have been those for which I have been indebted to your friendship, those which I have spent in your society: you may therefore easily conceive that I must have a powerful and a fatal reason for approaching you with any other feeling than one of unmitigated delight; and yet such is the fact."

An expression almost of alarm passed over the speaking features of Sybil as she compelled herself to ask an explanation of his meaning.

"Miss Delamere," said Mortimer, struggling with his emotion, "you have often congratulated me upon my probable union with my cousin, and I have been accustomed to receive your congratulations as calmly as they were offered; for I merely regarded the event after the fashion that all men regard death, as that which must one day happen, but of which the period is at once distant and indefinite. To-day, however, I can do so no longer; for I have been forcibly reminded of my engagement, and urged to fulfil it. In short, I am no longer my own master; but am called upon to devote myself to my affianced bride. Do you now understand the reason of a gloom so foreign to my nature in your society?"

"Scarcely," replied his companion, with a forced composure which lent a strange coldness to her manner. "Miss Mortimer is so very beautiful, so very faultless, that you can have no excuse for such a caprice. But it is the privilege of your sex to disappoint all ordinary calculations;

and doubtlessly the shadow will pass as speedily as it has gathered."

"This from you, Sybil!" said Frederic reproachfully.

"Is not the inference a friendly one? And are we not—have we not been—friends?"

"Such was my belief," murmured Mortimer.

"So much, at least, you may concede with safety," said Sybil somewhat haughtily; "I seek not, I have never sought, for more; nor do I comprehend why your approaching union with Miss Mortimer should degrade what was once a pleasure, as you have just confessed, into a duty. I have been frank with you, Mr. Mortimer, very frank. You will do me the justice to admit that I have never willingly interfered with the happiness or claims of your cousin. I explained to you without reserve, my feelings and my determination; nor have I seen any reason to alter or to recant either. That your absence will create a sensible blank in my everyday existence, I avow without hesitation. We never could have become more to each other than we have been; and I cannot consequently marvel that we must now become less. To a being isolated like myself, the possession of congenial companionship is undoubtedly a great boon; but I advance no pretensions to retain it when it militates against the higher and dearer claims of another."

"Enough!" said Frederic almost fiercely; "Enough! You know your power, Sybil, and you are merciless. I tell you, with a freedom equal to your own, that no such resolution as you have formed will ever resist the real impulse of a true woman-heart; and that, had I possessed the qualities which should have won you, despite all your pride and all your philosophy, you would have responded to my affection. And oh! had it indeed been so," he added passionately, as he possessed himself of the small and trembling hand that still rested upon his arm, "I would have braved even my mother's tears and my cousin's scorn to make you mine. But I was not worthy of you. I am the victim of my own frantic self-delusion, and must abide my fate. You, at least, are spared the pang of self-reproach; from the first you spurned and discouraged a passion to which you found no answer in your own breast, and you have acted gene-

rously and nobly. The fault and folly have been my own. All that I venture to ask is, that you will not withdraw your esteem from one to whom it has become indeed precious, but to whom you have resolutely refused the dearer privilege of living for your happiness. My doom is now sealed; in a few months, probably a few weeks—for I care not how nor when my destiny may be accomplished—I shall have become the husband of my cousin—of a woman who, however beautiful and gifted, has never loved me, and whom I can never love. To friendship only must I look, therefore, for that remnant of happiness which will be requisite to render my future existence endurable; and where can I seek it so effectually as at your hands?"

"I am no changeling in either heart or feeling, Mr. Mortimer," said Sybil, slowly and unaffectedly disengaging her hand from his clasp. "So long as we continue at The Grange, so long will you be a welcome guest beneath its roof. I should have rejoiced to see you with more of the elected bridegroom in your mood and manner, but I suppose that I must accept you upon your own terms. And now let us part. Your groom is probably awaiting you long ere this at the house."

"And our expedition to the ruins?" asked Frederic with sudden eagerness.

"Must be deferred," said Sybil, pressing her forehead with her hand. "I do not feel quite well, and fancy that I have already over-walked myself. We will throw that project, along with many others, into the casket of the future."

"Suffer me at least to pay my respects to Mrs. Delamere," persisted Mortimer, who could not conceal his mortification at this unexpected dismissal, and who was anxious before his departure from The Grange to overcome the sudden, and to him unaccountable, reserve of Sybil.

"My mother has not, in all probability, left her room," was the discouraging rejoinder, "and is still languid from the indisposition of yesterday. I will faithfully convey your remembrances and good wishes. And here, most opportunely, is your gallant bay! He is, in truth, a noble creature; and were I addicted to the somewhat

paltry vice of envy, I should be perhaps inclined to covet the possession of so fine an animal. As it is, I congratulate him upon having fallen into the hands of one who can alike appreciate and enhance his merits. Do not fail to offer my sincere regards to Mrs. Mortimer and her niece; and give Surrey his head if you would reach home in time for luncheon."

And with a graceful and calm brow Miss Delamere turned away, and disappeared within the portico.

CHAPTER IX.

THE reflections of Mortimer during his homeward ride were of a strangely conflicting nature; for, while the extraordinary and sudden coolness of Sybil pained his heart, it nevertheless, by a singular antithesis, flattered his vanity. There was only one way of accounting for conduct so wayward and unexpected; and he felt satisfied that, even while she rejected his love, she could not endure the idea that he should become engrossed by another. And if this were indeed true, what did it prove? Assuredly that Miss Delamere had permitted herself unconsciously to feel a deeper interest in him and his affections than she had apprehended to be possible under the circumstances.

The heart of Frederic throbbed proudly as the conviction grew stronger every instant. He felt that he was loved, and that he had compelled this love which had been so stedfastly refused to him; loved by a woman of genius and enthusiasm, who had instinctively yielded to a passion which she had foresworn, against which she had struggled, but which had proved too mighty for her strength.

And he had only learnt this truth when it was too late. The effort had been sufficiently bitter when it was made, but what must it be now?—now, that he was loved by Sybil—that the wildest dream of his ambition was realised, and that all he coveted on earth was within his grasp?

Perfectly satisfied in his own mind, despite the assurances which he had received from his mother, that the feelings of Gertrude would suffer no pain from his secession, and that her vanity alone would be wounded, he gave himself no uneasiness as to its ultimate effect upon her happiness; but he could not feel so well assured that Mrs. Mortimer would display equal philosophy.

For an instant his spirit quailed, and he almost shrank from exposing her to such a trial; but in the next the form of Sybil rose before him—Sybil, who by an effort might now become his own; and once more he nerved himself to his ungracious task.

He had, however, no sooner entered the hall, and recognised the door which in all probability alone separated him from his cousin, than he began to feel that the path which he had traced for himself was by no means strewn with roses: and it was, consequently, almost with a sensation of relief that, upon entering the breakfast-room, he found it occupied by both his mother and Gertrude.

The welcome of the former was affectionate, but somewhat sad, for she felt that his arrival had, under the circumstances, been too long deferred. She, however, uttered no reproach; while the conscious girl beside her, trembling with mingled fear and happiness, having greeted him with a forced smile and a burning blush, once more bent her fair face in silence over her work-frame. Suddenly remembering some important omission in her household arrangements, Mrs. Mortimer hastened to leave the room ere any other subject could be broached; and Frederic, who had not yet overcome his agitation, found himself *tête-à-tête* with his formidable cousin.

His first impulse was to walk to the window, where he stood for an instant, gazing fixedly on the objects beyond, but utterly unconscious in what they consisted; his next, to turn abruptly towards his silent companion, who still leant over her work, as though intent only upon its progress. He would have compensated the chance of escape with half his fortune, but it was too late; and finally, by a desperate effort, he flung himself into a chair which chanced to stand near her, and grasped the delicate hand that rested on the tapestry.

“Gertrude,” he said, in an accent which she could

scarcely recognise as that of her calm and indifferent cousin, and which for an instant she almost believed to be agitated by anxious affection; "you have much with which to reproach me. I feel that I must have disappointed most cruelly the anticipations of your fond and sisterly regard; but I trust to your generosity, to your forgiveness. Perhaps we have not understood each other. It is possible that I may have forgotten the changes which time never fails to produce on the feelings of a child who has expanded into a fair and beautiful woman; while, on your part, you may have omitted to make a due allowance for the influence which circumstances—which events—which, in short—but I will not dwell upon the past; only permit me to hope that we may at last, although, perhaps, still in an imperfect manner, understand each other."

Gertrude raised her large blue eyes to his in inquiring wonder, but she could not articulate a syllable. Her heart throbbed painfully, a presentiment of some coming trial oppressed her, and once more her head sank upon her bosom.

"You have been informed, my dear cousin," continued Frederic, hurriedly, for he had passed the Rubicon, and now only sought to terminate the interview as speedily as possible, "that in his last hours my father expressed a wish that we should one day be more closely united, while such was also my own most ardent hope when I returned to a home so painfully bereaved. That was, however, as you well know, no moment in which to enter upon such a subject, and perhaps the circumstance was fortunate for both of us. We had been too long strangers. We were ourselves unconscious of the changes to which we had been subjected, nor had much time elapsed ere I felt the fact; but believe me, my sweet cousin, that I no sooner found myself an alien from your heart than I tacitly withdrew my claim."

Gertrude gasped for breath; but, even overpowered as she was by this singular address, coming so immediately at the close of the communication made only that morning by her aunt, her innate sense of dignity prompted her at once to reply—

"You are free, Mr. Mortimer. On my side I advance

no claim upon your affections. You are the son of my benefactors—your will is my duty. Spare both yourself and me a discussion which must pain us both.”

“You misconceive me, Gertrude,” eagerly responded Mortimer, who, anxious to exonerate his own conduct, was blind to the intuitive delicacy of her motive, and for the moment even misunderstood himself. “If I could for a moment have flattered myself that I had created an interest in your bosom beyond that of mere relationship and habit, I should have acted very differently, but you have been consistent throughout. We have lived under the same roof without one sympathy in common. I have done homage to your admirable qualities of mind and heart. I have felt, and ever shall feel, deeply grateful for your devoted and filial affection towards my admirable mother. I acknowledge all the obligation which we owe you; but I base no presumptuous hope upon feelings which have borne no reference to myself.”

“Frederic,” said Miss Mortimer, who instinctively felt the real tendency of his expressions, and whose honest pride supplied her with temporary strength, “there needs no exoneration where there has been no wilful fault. We are not constituted for each other; and forgive me, my dear cousin, if I venture to entreat that you will at least spare yourself. You have repented the concession of this morning, and I thank you; I have need to thank you, (for that fatal acquiescence, wrung from a reluctant heart, might have involved us in one common misery,) that you are frank enough—feeling that your affection for a beloved mother had led you into a fatal error—to confess your mistake at once, and to confide in my friendship to restore you to happiness. Be happy, Frederic, be happy,” gasped the soul-stricken girl; “do not let one thought of me cloud the horizon of your existence. I know all that you could tell me. I have known, I have seen it long. My sisterly regard has been too sincere to look blindly upon the attachment by which you are absorbed. You owe me no explanation—no excuse. Perhaps I could have wished that you had spared me the trial of to-day, but it is now over; and henceforth I entreat you to think of me only as a devoted friend.”

“Gertrude, what can you mean?”

"Would you urge me to be more explicit? Surely it is unnecessary. My path is plain. I owe all to you and your parents. Suffer me to pay back the debt. You did not understand the heart that you have wrung; and the fault has perhaps been my own. Let me but see you happy, and I care not for myself."

"Happy!" echoed Mortimer. "Can I be happy otherwise than by the happiness of those about me? You are incomprehensible. From the first moment of our meeting you have shunned and avoided me. I come to you in all frankness to explain—it may be to atone—"

"I require no atonement," said the heroic girl, as she swept back the rich clusters of her hair and met his gaze, unshrinkingly. "Do not waste an instant upon me. My aunt must be reconciled to your change of purpose. Confide in my regard. I have been weak, very weak. I should have known by experience that a sincere affection cannot lightly be rooted out; and I should have felt that it will admit no substitute. Frederic, you love Miss Delamere, and I covet no reluctant heart. Forget that Gertrude Mortimer exists; or remember her only as the baby-playmate who amused your boyhood; but never cease to remember that in your orphan cousin you have a friend, whose every energy will be exerted to spare you one pang—to deliver you from one suffering. Only be just alike to yourself and to me. Only confess that you have bestowed your affections elsewhere, and that I am the sole obstacle to your happiness; and then believe that the obstacle is at once and for ever at an end. Shall it not be so?" she asked, as she extended her hand with a smile so ghastly that all the anguish of a bursting heart appeared to have settled upon her livid lips. "Will you not do me the justice to confide in my affection, and rely upon my truth?"

"Gertrude, I do not know you," murmured Frederic, appalled by the change which had passed over her faultless features. "Can you indeed feel—and for me?"

No words would suffice to convey the expression of mingled tenderness and reproach which for a brief instant lighted up the tearful eyes of the orphan; but in the next moment they were again averted, and their long lashes fell like a veil upon her pallid cheeks."

"Gertrude!" gasped Frederic, as he started from his chair and turned away, "you have been *very* cruel."

For a short time no sound was audible save the hurried tread of Mortimer, as he paced rapidly to and fro the apartment; but at length he paused once more beside the work-frame.

"I was prepared to love you," he whispered hoarsely; "I *did* love you; but you repelled me. My mother had vaunted your tenderness, your amiability, your devotion, and I yearned to possess myself of your affections. But how did you meet me, Gertrude? *How?* I cannot live without the love of those about me. I yearned for it—panted for it—I sought it at your hands; silently, it is true, but earnestly; and it was refused to me. I looked further—I may deceive myself—but I at least believed that I had found it—I believe so still. You now possess my secret, Gertrude. My whole being is absorbed in the passion to which I have delivered myself up. My very existence depends upon its success. I am no longer master of my own feelings. If I have indeed wronged your timid nature—"

"Enough—enough," murmured Miss Mortimer, almost inaudibly. "We are friends, Frederic. Do you now understand me? Friends—we must never again speak upon this subject. How can I serve you? I am ready."

The low sigh of her listener was his first response. He felt all the cruelty of the step that he had taken when it was too late to remedy the evil. His mother had judged correctly. Gertrude loved him; but what was such a love to him *now*! His whole heart and hope were bound up in Sybil. He knew not, he could not know, a second affection. It was too late to shrink before the dread of giving pain to another. His existence was on the die; and his path, though it might be difficult, was plain.

It is possible that Frederic might have successfully withstood every other weakness, every other snare laid for him by his own passions and prejudices; but in Sybil he had unfortunately encountered the arbitress of his destiny. He believed that she loved him passionately, because unwillingly; and that belief fostered his peculiar failing.

Weak, but still worthy, he was conscious of all the faultiness of his indecision, and pained by the suffering which

it had induced, although incapable of sacrificing his own dream of happiness in order to mitigate its effects ; and it was, consequently, with deep feeling that he again took the hand of his cousin, as he said—

“I accept the friendship so frankly offered, Gertrude ; and, in return, I tender you the fondest affection of a brother. I know all your worth ; perhaps I only appreciate its full value too late ; but of this it is vain to speak. I throw myself upon your kindly offices. No one has more influence over my mother than yourself ; exert that influence in my behalf. I fear that what you have to tell, and to defend, will wound her deeply ; but she loves me, and will forgive all, if you become my advocate. May the day arrive in which I am enabled to repay your goodness. Believe me I shall know how to be eloquent when your happiness is to reward my exertions.

The pale cheek of Gertrude flushed for an instant. She could offer no reply to such an assurance, feeling as she did that for her, henceforward, the word happiness would be a mere empty sound. She simply clasped the hand of her cousin in her own, and ratified by a look the promise she had already made.

She had scarcely done this when Mrs. Mortimer re-entered the apartment ; a happy smile was upon her lips, and words of self-gratulation were ready to burst forth, for she believed that her absence had enabled Frederic to compensate to his cousin for all her past sufferings ; but the light faded from her eye, and the congratulations died upon her tongue as she approached them : it was at once evident that both would be ill-timed—a conviction which was strengthened by the fact that, as she appeared, her son hastily seized his hat, and hurried from the room.

“Gertrude !” she exclaimed, anxiously, “what is the meaning of this ? Can it be possible that Frederic has again deceived me ?”

But Gertrude’s strength was now exhausted, and she could only bury her face upon her tapestry-frame, and give free vent to the bitter tears of humiliation and blighted hope.

For an instant Mrs. Mortimer stood aghast ; she could not mistake the nature of the emotion upon which

she looked. She saw at once that the cold drops which trickled through the slender fingers were wrung from the heart's sorrow; and, forgetting for an instant all the devoted love which she bore towards her son, she attempted at once to console her niece and to relieve her own feelings by giving loose to the indignant anger which his vacillating conduct had awakened in her generous spirit.

Only for a moment, however, did the noble girl suffer the outbreak of her irritation to have way. Rousing herself by a powerful effort, she lifted her pale face from its resting place, and, dashing away the tears which still crowded into her dim eyes, she hastened to declare that the blame of all that had occurred rested solely with herself; that her own vanity, her own weakness, had alone led to this distressing scene; that her cousin had deceived himself in believing for a time that he could love her, and had frankly and truthfully declared his error before it had become a source of misery to both parties; that she had seen the folly and madness of her pretensions; and that, henceforward, she should regard him only as a brother.

Mrs. Mortimer listened in grief and admiration, but she was not to be misled. Throughout her whole life Gertrude had been to her as an affectionate and confiding child, and she knew every impulse and every emotion of the young heart which was now bleeding before her.

"I see it all!" she exclaimed, in a hard, cold tone, utterly unlike the usual softness of her affectionate accents. "But Frederic deceives himself as he has deceived me if he hopes ever to obtain my consent to such a measure. To you, my child, I can say nothing which would express my admiration of your generous and self-sacrificing conduct; but it shall not avail. You plead in vain, Gertrude. He may be insensible to your affection, blind to your merits, incapable of appreciating your virtue, but he shall never disgrace the memory of his father by bestowing his name upon one who is unworthy to bear it."

"He loves her, my dear aunt."

An expression of cold contempt settled upon the fine features of Mrs. Mortimer.

"He has avowed to me," resolutely pursued Gertrude,

amid her sobs, "that his happiness depends upon Miss Delamere. Reflect upon this acknowledgment, I beseech of you. *His* happiness—the happiness of your beloved and only son. And can you wonder that it should be so? Remember her beauty, her wit, her marvellous acquirements, and confess that few indeed would be able to resist them. Let us forget the past; your affection and my gratitude will alike enable us to do this—in time."

"I will hear no more," said Mrs. Mortimer, as she rose from her seat. "The dream of my life is over, but I have still the authority which Nature has given to the parent over the child. Frederic must choose between his mother and his mistress. Of your hand he has ceased to be worthy; but should he bestow his own upon the manœuvring woman by whom he is now enthralled, he ceases to be my son."

"Oh! in mercy revoke that cruel sentence, my dear, dear aunt!" gasped out the affrighted girl, flinging herself upon her knees, and impeding the retreat of the excited mother. "Think of the hours of affection, of anxiety, of joy which you have passed together—think how his father loved him; have pity upon me, who love him still!"

Mrs. Mortimer bent over the trembling suppliant at her feet, and pressed her pale lips to the still paler forehead which was upraised to meet them, but she did not swerve from her resolution. Her heart was wrung and her pride was wounded. She had been so long accustomed to regard her son as a being superior to his fellow-men, that she could not brook this sudden dispersion of all her cherished illusions; and it was with a firm step and a tearless eye that she at length, supported by her indignation, and strengthened by the spectacle of Gertrude's wretchedness and heroism, passed into the library, and desired a servant to request the immediate presence of Mr. Mortimer.

The summons was, however, fruitless, for Frederic had already left the house.

CHAPTER X.

ON quitting his cousin, the first impulse of Mortimer had simply been to absent himself for a time from home, until the influence of Gertrude had enabled her to reconcile his mother to his change of purpose. Ill at ease, and anxious, despite the evidence of his senses, to believe that the attachment of his cousin, of which he could no longer entertain a doubt, was the mere idle caprice of a young girl, he no sooner found himself once more alone than his thoughts reverted to Sybil. Sybil would not so readily have transferred her claim to another had his hand been pledged to her; but Sybil knew how to love, and to love deeply. Her every word and look betrayed her. Had she not been all enthusiasm and frankness so long as she believed him to be free? And had not a sudden coldness and reserve succeeded to the knowledge of his betrothment? True, she had said, and repeated on many occasions, that she would never marry; but had he not as often smiled at a declaration in which he placed no faith? And was he not now justified in his incredulity?

She had, perhaps, acted strangely and inconsistently at their last meeting, but who should say what dormant memories the announcement of his approaching marriage might have awakened? She had confessed to a former attachment, and was it not possible that the intelligence which he so abruptly imparted to her had struck some hidden chord which had for a time ceased to vibrate in her heart, and that thus her change of mood and manner might in no way bear upon her feeling for himself?

The suspicion was torture, and the cold drops stood upon the brow of Frederic as it became stronger every instant. Should this indeed be so, idly had he wounded the affection and pride of his mother, vainly had he tortured the sensibility of his cousin, cruelly had he deceived himself!

Any conviction, however bitter, was preferable to such an uncertainty, and in five minutes more Frederic was galloping recklessly towards The Grange.

Great were his astonishment and dismay on perceiving that the hall was encumbered with trunks and packages, which a couple of servants were engaged in cording and heaping one upon the other, and still more utter was his despair when he learnt that almost immediately after his departure Miss Delamere had desired that the travelling carriage might be in readiness early on the following morning, to convey her mother and herself to the coast, where they were to embark for the continent.

The brain of Mortimer whirled, and his pulses throbbed with emotion. What could this mean? It was evident that the project was a sudden one, since no leave-taking had been contemplated. Could anything have happened in which the happiness or safety of Sybil was involved? Was he to lose her just as he had discovered that she had become necessary to his existence? Mortimer was bewildered by rapidly conflicting feelings; and without further hesitation, he traversed the hall and entered the morning room, resolved to learn the truth from the lips of Sybil herself.

Great, consequently, was his disappointment when he found it occupied only by Mrs. Delamere, who sat in the accustomed chair, listlessly looking upon the open pages of a volume, from which it was evident that she did not imbibe a single idea; and this languid and impassable object, jarring as it did upon the excited nerves of Mortimer, was ill calculated to calm his agitation.

"Ha! is that you, Mr. Mortimer?" yawned the lady, depositing the book upon a table near her; "I am glad you are come. Sybil is busy in her own room. We leave this to-morrow morning early."

"Shall you be absent long?" asked Frederic, with a cold thrill at his heart.

"I don't know; Sybil settled it all. I hate travelling, but she said we must go;" and she turned uneasily among her cushions.

"You have received no unpleasant news, I trust?"

"No, I believe not; but Sybil knows best. It is her own arrangement. I suppose she is tired of The Grange."

Tired of The Grange! Miss Delamere tired of The Grange! How bitter was the inference! But the very

excess of his mortification gave Frederic courage to pursue his inquiries.

"You are not about to take a very long journey, I hope?"

"I really can't say; I fancy that Sybil has not quite made up her mind; for when I asked the same question she merely said, 'Anywhere; she did not care where we went if we got away from this neighbourhood for a time.'"

And, as Mrs. Delamere closed her eyes with an expression of fatigue after so unusually lengthy a speech, the blood rushed to the brow of her auditor, and a proud smile rose instinctively to his lip.

All was clear; Sybil loved him, and *feared* to remain where she must so soon encounter him as the husband of Gertrude. The post arrived at Westrum before noon, and, consequently, it was certain that no intelligence of importance could have reached The Grange through that medium since he had left it in the morning. On his arrival he had been received with smiles, and greeted with the tidings of a projected party of pleasure; it was only after he had told his tale that the brow of Sybil had grown dark and her tone cold. And now she sought to avoid him.

Frederic was no coxcomb, but the inference was too palpable to be mistaken. The fatal departure might be prevented—must be prevented; for was he not now free to pour out all his spirit before the idol of his heart? The moment of inaction was consequently past. He had hitherto merely sought the love of Sybil tacitly; it now remained for him to ask it.

He turned once more to Mrs. Delamere.

"And Sybil—Miss Delamere—where is she?"

His companion had recourse to her ether bottle, for this pertinacity overpowered her, as she replied, "I really don't know—I believe in her room. You can ring the bell and inquire of her maid."

Frederic hastened to obey; and the servant who answered the summons returned to inform the anxious visitor that his mistress had a short time previously walked into the grounds.

With a hasty bow Mortimer left the room, and started

in pursuit of the fair wanderer ; but he traversed the conservatories, and entered every temple and grotto in vain ; Miss Delamere was no where to be seen. At length, almost in despair of finding her, and half tempted to believe that he had been misled, he plunged into a small but dense thicket, which skirted the property ; and ere long he discovered Sybil seated under the shadow of an ilex, with her head pillowed on her hand, and her face entirely hidden by the dark and luxuriant masses of her hair, which had escaped from the comb that habitually confined it, and now fell about her shoulders to the ground.

For a moment he stood motionless, fixed in admiration and astonishment. It was the first occasion upon which he had seen the brilliant Sybil in tears ; and now he detected the large drops slowly trickling through her fingers. The careless *abandon* of her attitude, and the secluded spot which she had chosen in order to conceal her grief from other eyes, also told a tale of deep and bitter suffering ; and his heart beat quicker as the conviction grew upon him that he should soon be privileged to dry those tears, and to turn that grief to gladness. Yet still he lingered ; and it was only by an effort that he could resolve upon breaking so bright a spell.

His step was noiseless upon the moss-grown turf, and thus he reached her side before she was aware of his approach ; nor even then did she stir either eye or limb until Mortimer, gently bending over her, whispered her name.

“ *You* here !” she exclaimed, as she bounded from the earth, and dashed away the moisture from her long lashes. “ What can Mr. Mortimer come here to seek ?”

“ Your love, Sybil—your coveted and priceless love !” was the impassioned reply. “ I have struggled in vain to obey you, to satisfy myself with your friendship, to immolate the happiness of my whole life to a distasteful and enforced duty : I cannot do it, Sybil ; I had overrated my powers of endurance. You must listen to me and love me, or my existence will henceforth be a blank. You are about to leave England, but that step, extreme and cruel as it is, shall avail you nothing : I will follow you to the end of the earth : I will be proof alike against your coldness and your disdain. Till I met you, I was at peace ; what I am now

is your own work, and you must abide the result of your fascinations. Sybil, my precious Sybil, shall I sue in vain?"

As the last words escaped his lips, the knee of Mortimer bent before Miss Delamere, and her hand was clasped in his. He saw not the proud and triumphant gleam which for an instant passed over her features, for before he again raised his eyes to her face, all was once more calm, and cold, and passionless.

"Why are you silent, Sybil?" he pursued with increasing emotion. "One word—I ask but for one—and will you deny it to me?"

"What can I say?" demanded Miss Delamere in a low murmur, but still without withdrawing her hand. "I know you only as the betrothed of your cousin. From the first hour of our acquaintance I was aware of your engagement, and I have told you more than once my steadfast purpose to resist all blandishments which might tend to peril my liberty of thought and affection."

"I have no faith in such resolves," said Frederic doggedly, as he rose unbidden from her feet. "Sybil, you can no longer deceive me with mere words. It is not your heart that speaks. I will not, I dare not believe that you are a vain and passionless coquette, who has whiled away a few heavy hours in insuring my misery, and this I must believe, or be assured that I have ceased to be indifferent to your peace."

"You are bold, sir," said Sybil haughtily, as she prepared to turn away.

"I *am* bold," acquiesced her companion, clasping her arm in order to intercept her retreat; "I *am* bold, Sybil; for I am desperate. Only a few hours back, conscious that I could not live without your affection, I threw myself upon the generosity of my cousin, and she liberated me from my engagement."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Miss Delamere energetically; "Gertrude Mortimer may be cold and self-centred, but she was secure of your hand, and it is not possible that she could renounce her right."

Once more the brow of Frederic cleared, and his eye gleamed with delight. "I thank you for the doubt," he said tenderly; "it tells me all I sought to know. And

you *will* love me, Sybil, will you not? For I swear to you that I am free."

"And your mother?" murmured his listener.

"Gertrude has undertaken to convince her that she had mistaken us both, and to prepare her to receive another and a dearer daughter."

"And yet this must not be," said Miss Delamere, as, suddenly perceiving the disarray of her magnificent hair, she stooped and raised the comb which lay at her feet, and twisted the scattered tresses into a luxuriant knot on the summit of her small and graceful head: "such a proceeding would be neither delicate nor generous. Even supposing that I had been weak enough to suffer my feelings to overcome not only my reason, but also a resolution formed years ago, I could not consent to build up my happiness upon the misery of another. You have known your cousin from her birth—I am the mere acquaintance of a few brief months."

"They have comprised all of my existence which I care to remember," broke in Frederic impetuously.

Miss Delamere thanked him by a look—and such a look!

"Every action, almost every thought, of your cousin has been revealed to you. Of me you know nothing, save that I exist, and stand beside you."

"I ask nothing from the past—all from the future."

"You are incorrigible," murmured Sybil, in a tone which betrayed her innate gratification; "but you must, nevertheless, listen to reason."

"I will listen to anything from your lips."

"But, having so done, you will not have done all: you must act as well as hearken. Mrs. Mortimer will never consent to receive me as her daughter. Where *you* feel, *she* will reflect. You know what have been her plans, and she is no longer young. I cannot condescend to be merely received on sufferance in any family."

"Sybil, dear Sybil, your delicacy is morbid—is misplaced. My mother already admires and esteems you, and she will no sooner become convinced that you have my happiness in your keeping than she will learn to love you as her own child."

"Do not deceive yourself, my friend," said Sybil;

"that Mrs. Mortimer admires me—perhaps! But esteem!—oh, believe me! that I shall never be esteemed by Mrs. Mortimer if I thwart her plans, though I should present myself with my genealogical tree in one hand, and the whole history of my past life in the other."

"You have but to present yourself as my affianced bride, and that shall suffice."

"For yourself I doubt not, and I thank you that you at least are satisfied to take me upon trust; but I have carefully studied the character of your mother—Gentle and womanly as she is, she is capable of firm and strong determination. From your earliest boyhood she had resolved upon your union with your cousin, and she will not, trust me, revoke her purpose."

"I am no longer a boy, and I have refused to consent to this hateful marriage. Am I not free to act as I deem best, and to secure my happiness according to my own ideas?"

"Undoubtedly, but you are unstable. On either side there must be a struggle. Let me play the monitor for once. Fulfil the wishes of Mrs. Mortimer, and let us part."

"And this is your advice?"

"Is it not that which I should offer? Better, far better to be the victim of my own sense of right than of another's scorn!"

"And is the strife of feeling, then, confined only to yourself and to my mother?"

"Not so!—Oh, no! not so," said Sybil with emotion; "I do not for an instant forget your cousin. Poor girl! so young, so beautiful, and yet so wretched!"

"I spoke not of Gertrude," said Mortimer impatiently. "I ventured to believe that I, too, might have been remembered. But enough of this, dear Sybil; cease to imagine that, by rejecting my affection, you restore me to my cousin, for all is over between us. I might have loved her had I never known Sybil Delamere, but she is aware that it is now impossible. Spurn my affection, if, indeed, such be your will; but I swear to you that I will never be the husband of another. Leave The Grange, if you still persist in your purpose; but

wander where you may, I will pursue you while I have life."

"This is truly 'Midsummer madness,' Frederic," replied Miss Delamere; "however, thus much I concede—our journey shall be delayed."

"For *my* sake, Sybil?" asked Frederic, as he extended his hand.

"For *your* sake, if you will have it so," was the reply; and the small fingers of the lady rested for an instant on the outstretched palm of her suitor; "but build up no vain hopes upon this concession," she continued laughingly; "for I am not yet convinced—nor won."

CHAPTER XI.

So long as the intoxication produced by the presence of Sybil continued to exert its influence, every feeling and every thought of Mortimer were absorbed by the one loved object; and it was only when he had reluctantly taken his departure from The Grange that he once more became keenly alive to the irksome and painful nature of the interview which awaited him with his mother. He well knew how devotedly she loved him, and the tears sprang to his eyes as he admitted to himself how great must now be her disappointment.

His manhood rebelled at the mental and moral coercion to which he had been subjected, it is true; but his affection for his mother remained undiminished.

Sad were the feelings which travelled with Frederic to his home; and how dreary seemed the venerable house, which had till now been ever lighted up by the beams of his own sunny heart! Once his breast bounded as he passed its threshold, but now all appeared wrapped in gloom—Sybil was not beneath its roof—Sybil, the enchantress, whom he was to win through tears, reproaches, and regrets!

But Frederic deceived himself. The spirit of his mother was crushed within her. She had no longer

energy for reproach. All her remaining strength of purpose was concentrated upon one point. The heart-dream of Gertrude was dispelled for ever, and she must aid her in the wretched task of smiling at her own misery.

Thus, when Frederic entered her presence, she received him sadly but tenderly. His fault had been the offspring of a few months, but her love had been the growth of years, and the heart weeps long ere its crimson tide is exhausted.

"I have seen Gertrude," were her first words, after she had welcomed him; "and she has related to me all the substance of the morning's conversation. You are free, my son, to act as you think best regarding your cousin. I could have wished it otherwise, but happiness is not our lot in this world. She has acted, as she ever does, with a noble self-abnegation, which makes me proud of the adopted daughter I have reared, and I cannot permit myself to murmur when she is silent. Suffice it, then, that I shall never again intrude this subject upon you. Better, far better, that you should reject the hand of such a being at once, than receive it only to involve both her and yourself in one common misery. She is too good, too loving, to be flung by like an outworn toy; and this feeling is my best and only consolation under a serious disappointment."

"Believe me, my dear mother," said Frederic, at once touched and astonished at the calm and self-possessed manner of his mother, "that, as I once before assured you, Gertrude and I are totally unsuited to each other."

"Say, rather," was the reply, "that your means of happiness were made too easy by my want of judgment."

"Did you know, or could you guess, how much I feel in thus thwarting your wishes, you would understand that no such puerile cause has dictated my conduct," urged Mortimer earnestly; "I do assure you that I act only upon conviction."

"May you never have cause to discover your mistake," was the rejoinder of Mrs. Mortimer. "Remember, Frederic, that marriage is the most important step hazarded by either man or woman. You do not marry for the world, but for your home; and the woman who dazzles the most

in society is frequently the least calculated to form the blessing of the domestic circle."

"I admit the truth of your reasoning, my dear mother," said Frederic, eagerly; "but surely it is quite possible to meet with one who unites all the necessary qualities to do both; and I am exacting enough to require that mine should be equal to either emergency."

Mrs. Mortimer sighed deeply, but made no reply.

"Nay, more," pursued her son, "I consider it only due to you to declare, without reserve or hesitation, that I have every reason to hope and to believe that I have found that one."

"Do you allude to Miss Delamere?" asked his mother, coldly.

"I do. Will you not, then, my dear mother, receive her with the affection which alone can render my marriage perfectly happy?"

"Has she told you frankly who she is, and what is her real position in the world?" demanded Mrs. Mortimer, with the same resolute composure which she had maintained throughout the whole of this trying conversation.

"She has not; but I am alone to blame, if blame there be. I would not insult her by a doubt, and I declined the confidence."

"And she permitted you to do so?"

"She simply yielded to my desire. Satisfied that she is all that is good and pure, and high-minded, I had little curiosity to pry into the past."

Mrs. Mortimer sank back in her chair, and buried her face in her hands. She was about to make a mighty effort, and her composure was rapidly giving way. Suddenly, however, she roused herself, forced back the burning tears which were endeavouring to escape, and looking steadily at her son, said, sadly but firmly—

"And can it really be true, Frederic, that you would introduce into the home of your ancestors, and the heart of your mother, a woman of whom you know absolutely nothing? And you ask me to look upon so doubtful a person as a daughter—as your wife? If this indeed be so—and I read no denial in your countenance—it behoves *me*, at least, to remember what is due alike to the name I bear and to myself. You are your own master. Should you decide

upon placing your happiness and your respectability in the keeping of this ambiguous personage, I have no power to prevent the commission of so egregious and dangerous a folly; but if you anticipate my consent and countenance to such a step, and cherish one hope of inducing me to become a party to such a contract, I now, and definitively, declare that you deceive yourself; for that I never will recognise Miss Delamere as my daughter, until I am convinced that there exists no passage of her past life that she is anxious to conceal."

"Revoke that sentence, I beseech of you, my dear mother!" exclaimed Frederic, with strong emotion, as he approached her; but the energy of Mrs. Mortimer was almost exhausted; the tears, no longer to be restrained, were falling in showers upon her pallid cheeks; and she only retained strength to waive him from her, as she hurried from the room, exclaiming emphatically, "Never!"

She had no sooner reached her own apartment, and after a passionate fit of weeping had partially recovered her composure, than the hitherto proud and happy mother, pressing her throbbing temples in her trembling hands, began to reflect with earnest anxiety upon the position of her son. Every report which had ever reached her on the subject of Miss Delamere—and the neighbourhood had for months been rife with them—although when they first came to her knowledge she had disregarded and almost forgotten them, now recurred vividly to her memory and increased her alarm. The abrupt appearance of the mother and the daughter at The Grange, unaccompanied by a single male relative or friend, and unprovided with any introductions—the lavish expenditure which had ensued—the mystery in which the past history of the strangers was enveloped—the control exercised by the younger lady, her unquestioned authority over the establishment, and the self-sufficing independence of her character—all conspired to terrify Mrs. Mortimer, and to fill her with the most painful apprehensions.

Where Frederic saw only single-heartedness and enthusiastic feeling, his mother discovered cold and worldly calculation; and while he believed that he had won the love of Sybil against the dictates of her own reason, she felt

convinced that he was the victim of a system of conduct as clever as it was premeditated.

Thus reflected Mrs. Mortimer; and with bitterness of spirit she felt how unequal was the contest between her own gentle and pure-minded Gertrude and the world-taught Sybil; and how equally ill-calculated was the frank and confiding nature of her son to resist the blandishments of so accomplished an actress.

Not once did she suffer herself to believe it possible that she might, by these conclusions, wrong Miss Delamere; she remembered the brilliant fortune which Frederic had inherited from his father, and she felt convinced that therein lay the whole secret of her affection. It is true that the style of living adopted at The Grange far outweighed that of her own establishment; but this profusion had only been the work of a few months, and might terminate as abruptly as it had commenced. None knew its source, and none could consequently decide on its permanency. Like everything else connected with Sybil, it was a mystery, and consequently suspicious.

CHAPTER XII.

FROM her solitary chamber Mrs. Mortimer at length proceeded to that of Gertrude, who, prostrated by the intense emotion which she had undergone, and the violence which she had done to her own feelings while labouring to reconcile the mind of her aunt to the views of Frederic, had flung herself upon her bed in an agony of wretchedness, where the anxious Mrs. Mortimer now found her scorched with incipient fever, her eye hard and glossy, and her cheek flushed into a burning crimson.

"My poor, poor girl," she murmured fondly, as she drew a chair near her pillow, "you are the first victim! But you must forget, or at least despise him, Gertrude. Yes; though he be my own son, the child of my hope and of my age, still do I bid you despise him. He is no longer worthy of a love like yours. He can no longer estimate a pure

affection; and your pride must teach you to overcome an ill-placed attachment."

Gertrude answered only by a burst of tears.

"That he should hesitate even for an instant between you!" pursued Mrs. Mortimer, with indignation, as she tenderly wiped away the scorching drops which fell upon the flushed cheeks of her niece. "I no longer recognise my son. But I have at once and definitely refused my sanction to his marriage with that artful woman at The Grange. No nameless adventurer shall lord it under the roof of the Mortimers while I live to guard the honour of our house. Let him marry, if he will, some poor and honest peasant girl; bitter as such a trial would be to me, I think I could support it, when I knew that she *was* honest. But this woman—what know we of her? What may we ever know? And to reflect that such knowledge might come when it was too late, and that we had received in our very home a woman whose name made the virtuous blush and the idle sneer. No, no—that I could never bear. Dear as he is to me, I would rather look upon him in his coffin, and follow him to the vault of his ancestors; for he would then lie there undishonoured, as the son of such a father *must* do."

And overcome by the vision which she had conjured up, the afflicted mother bent her face over that of her suffering niece, and their tears were mingled upon the pillow.

"May you not wrong her by these suspicions, my dear aunt?" gasped out Gertrude, after a pause too painful for endurance; "remember that we know absolutely nothing of these strangers, who may perhaps have been less reserved to Frederic. Let me conjure you to decide nothing rashly. His happiness—the happiness of your only son, the child of your deep and untiring love, is at stake."

Mrs. Mortimer made no reply.

The appeal of Gertrude had, indeed, dried her tears, but it had effected no change in her resolution. Frederic had disappointed and outraged her affection; and this she felt that she must bear as best she might; but that he should dishonour alike himself and her, she was resolved never to permit, so long as her will maintained its influence over his mind.

Thus the interview produced no comfort to either; for Gertrude, bowed beneath her own sorrows, and be-

wildered by the sudden change in her hitherto gentle and placid protectress, did not venture again to plead a cause which insured her own misery, but remained with closed eyes and trembling heart, a prey to rapidly increasing illness and sickening dread.

As she writhed upon her bed of pain, vainly endeavouring to conceal her anguish both of mind and body from her companion, Mrs. Mortimer was aroused by the touch of a burning hand from a reverie into which she had fallen, and turned anxiously to utter some word of entreaty or consolation, when she saw the widely dilated and rigid eyes of the poor sufferer fixed unconsciously upon her, while her cheeks and lips had become as cold and pale as marble, and at once discovered that she was no longer able to give ear to either.

In an agony of terror she rushed to the bell to summon assistance; and ten minutes had scarcely elapsed ere the wild and ringing laughter, and incoherent words of the unhappy girl proclaimed a violent attack of delirium.

Even to the beloved voice of her aunt the tortured ear was deaf, and the wrung heart closed, and long ere the arrival of the physician the fever was at its height.

And where was Frederic at this trying moment?

Once more on his way to The Grange, but himself scarcely conscious of the nature of his own intentions. Startled as he had been by the determined and unwonted energy of his mother, he was too thoroughly subjugated by the spell of Sybil to be shaken in his purpose; and, with the vacillation in which he had latterly indulged, he dreamt of delay, of temporising, of the discovery of some medium of action which might tend to reconcile all the conflicting interests by which he was surrounded; but the more he reflected, the more he became convinced of the hopelessness of such a result.

As this conviction grew upon him, he determined to make a last appeal to the hitherto unfailing affection and indulgence of his mother. And, cheered by this resolution, he had already turned his horse's head once more towards home, when he heard some one galloping rapidly behind him, and in another moment a groom in the Delamere livery placed in his hand a note from Sybil.

He tore it open. It contained only a few lines, but they sufficed at once to change his intentions.

"Come to me," it said; "I am wretched, and have much to say. Mamma expects you to dinner. Mention no word of this morning's conversation. She suspects nothing.

"SYBIL."

There could be no mistake. Miss Delamere was about to volunteer the very confidence which he had determined to solicit; and thus he should go doubly armed into the presence of his offended mother, and all difficulties would be overcome. It was only by a violent effort that he could restrain himself from pressing the welcome paper to his lips: and, having made a brief reply to the messenger, he at once struck spurs into his horse and retraced his way towards The Grange.

The dinner-bell rang in vain, and Mrs. Mortimer, to her extreme dismay, seated herself at table alone. Never before had she felt so thoroughly desolate; for hitherto, in the absence of her son, Gertrude had been her companion; and as she remembered that one of her children was now stretched upon a bed of sickness, while she had parted from the other in displeasure, her heart swelled, and she hurriedly quitted the room to conceal her emotion from the servants. For Frederic's sake alone she had made an effort to appear in her accustomed place, and he had absented himself without one attempt at explanation or excuse, even although, for the first time in their lives, they had exchanged other words than those of affection.

"This, only this, was wanting to complete my wretchedness," she murmured to herself, as she once more bent her steps to the chamber of the suffering girl. "Now, indeed, my cup of bitterness is full, for my son's heart is estranged from me!"

CHAPTER XIII.

It was a glorious evening, and the vivid sunbeams which were carefully excluded from the sick chamber of Miss Mortimer were streaming broad and bright over hill and valley, and tinting all the foliage with a golden glow, when Frederic, once more full of hope and confidence, sprang from his saddle at the door of The Grange.

Ardent in all his feelings, his previous depression had been succeeded by a wild and baseless joy, which sparkled in his eyes, and gave an unwonted animation to his whole person. Sybil had told him in her note that she was wretched, and he comprehended at once that this wretchedness had been induced by an instinctive delicacy, which upbraided her for the silence that, in their relative position, was a wrong done to his affection.

Now, therefore, he was about to receive the whole outpouring of her trust, and he congratulated himself upon the chivalrous generosity which had led him to believe in her without proof, and to love her without any other guarantee than her own sweet and guileless nature.

She was alone when he entered the saloon, and in an instant he was at her side, with her hand clasped in his.

"You have summoned me, Sybil, and I am here."

"I thank you," was the calm reply. "After you had left me this morning I felt that I, at least, had said too much or too little, and that it was expedient we should meet again at once. This is destroying the romance of our position strangely, is it not, Frederic? But I am aware that I have been to blame, and I am anxious to repair my error."

"Who would not sin to excuse themselves so sweetly? Although I am unconscious of the fault, I am ready to exact the penance."

"Thus, then—In our late conversation you spoke plainly and undisguisedly; I could not, and I did not, affect to misunderstand you. You offered yourself to me unreservedly—to me, of whom you know nothing, save that I have pleased your fancy; and, for so much I will admit, gained your affection. I urged, feebly I fear, but

truthfully, my conviction of your mother's disapproval, when I should have done more. Suffer me, therefore, to do this now, and at the same time to assure you of my sincere regret, that I should have allowed you to be misled even for a few hours as to my determination.—Nay, you must hear me out. I am quite conscious of my debt of obligation to yourself; it is one which, throughout my life, I am never likely to forget; but I am too proud to avail myself of a trust so unbounded; and that same pride——”

“Sybil, you are ungenerous!” exclaimed Frederic. “Was it for this you summoned me? I know not how I have deserved so bitter a disappointment. All the world appear to have conspired against me.”

“That is precisely what I apprehended,” said Miss Delamere coldly; “you have confided to Mrs. Mortimer our conversation of this morning, and my warning has proved correct.”

“And what though it be so?” was the impetuous reply. “I am dependent upon no one. My mother—even *my* mother, whom I had hitherto been accustomed to consider as the most unselfish and unprejudiced of human beings, may fail me when I calculate upon her affection; but she cannot compel me to sacrifice the happiness of my life to a caprice.”

“And may I ask what is the nature of my unworthiness?” asked Sybil, in an accent which, although it was intended to be playful, involved a strong tinge of sarcasm.

Frederic bit his lip, and remained silent.

“I understand and appreciate all that you would say,” was the remark of his companion, as she rose coldly and indignantly from her seat; “Mrs. Mortimer fears to unite her son with probable disgrace. I will relieve her from so painful an apprehension.”

“Sybil, Sybil, you will drive me distracted!” exclaimed Mortimer. “Am *I*, then, to be the sacrifice of this struggle of misplaced pride? Are no concessions to be made to save *me* from wretchedness?”

“To you, and for you, I should have considered none too great,” murmured Miss Delamere, falling back in the

chair from which she had just risen, and covering her eyes with her hand, which, however, failed to conceal the large tears that streamed thick and fast upon her cheeks; "but I cannot, and I should not, condescend to lend myself to a degradation such as this. Let us part at once; I am inured to suffering, and you will soon learn to forget that I have passed like a dark cloud over the horizon of your life."

"Sybil," said Frederic almost inarticulately, "if for me you will indeed consent to sacrifice your own feelings, may I not entreat of you to humour my mother in this caprice? Believe me that it does not arise from any doubt of your integrity—it cannot—but from an over-weening affection for myself."

"It is precisely because I do appreciate and know all this," said Miss Delamere, "that I recall also what is due to my own dignity. Once more, let us part."

"You condemn me then remorselessly to wretchedness, Sybil?"

"Do not mistake yourself, Frederic, you will soon overcome a passing disappointment. You were happy before you knew me; you have now only to forget me, and that happiness will be renewed."

"And it is you, Sybil—you, who confess that you have loved—who tell me this? But true, true; you have a right to do so—for you at least have loved, and have forgotten."

"Yes, Mr. Mortimer," was the reply; but the eye of the lady flamed, and her bosom heaved as she listened to the reproach; "I have indeed done this; but shall I tell you how? By proving that I had raised an unworthy object upon the altar of my heart—by finding that the world, the hideous world, with its sordid interests and its vulgar prejudices, had come between me and my idol—by discovering the hands of brass and the feet of clay where I had fondly believed that all was sterling ore. And now blame me, if you can—and dare."

"Sybil, you sport with my affection; you wrong my nature! you compel me to play a part unworthy alike of you and of myself. I can no more live without your love henceforth than without the air I breathe, or the earth upon which I tread. Be generous, Sybil—be your-

self; and do not sacrifice an affection like mine to a mere overstrained idea of dignity."

"Place yourself for an instant in my position," said Miss Delamere, as the large tears fell slowly upon her cheeks. "What has been my conduct since my arrival in your neighbourhood? Have I not borne myself like one conscious of her own character and station? And would you ask me to submit to a degradation fitting only for a person whose antecedents had been suspicious, or at least suspected? Am I not living under the roof with my own mother? Do we not possess all the habits and attributes of gentlewomen? And is it because a love of retirement has induced us to select a secluded corner of the kingdom as our temporary home, that I am to be insulted by doubts injurious to my honour?"

"Sybil, dear Sybil, believe me——"

"Frederic, I *do* believe you! Would that I had less easily been won to do so! but regrets are now alike idle and unavailing. I will even confess that our estrangement will cause me a pang. But it shall be borne."

Large drops of emotion stood upon the brow of Mortimer as he listened; and when, as if to render the image more complete, Miss Delamere buried her face amid the cushions of the sofa, and her quick sobs fell upon his ear, he forgot all save the syren by whom his very spirit was enthralled, and, casting himself at her feet, he vowed that no earthly power should part them. She was his home and his world, and all beside her image was blotted out and annihilated. He covered her hand with burning kisses—he besought her to have pity upon his agony—he addressed her by all the endearing names which love lends to the lips of his votaries—he entreated only for one word, one smile—but for a time Sybil was obdurate; nor was it until the agitation of Mortimer had reached its climax that she again raised her head, and, parting the luxuriant hair which clustered about his brow, gazed upon him with a sorrowful tenderness more eloquent than even his own impassioned words.

There was hope, however, in that look, and Frederic sprang from her feet and clasped her in his arms, exclaiming, "You are mine, Sybil; deny it not; you are mine! I read it in your eyes. You will forget all save my

affection. My life shall be one long devotion to your will—one long struggle to secure your happiness. You know not, you cannot know, how earnestly I love you!"

Lovely was the smile with which Miss Delamere replied; for, although her lips moved, no sound escaped them. But Mortimer was satisfied; such a smile could beam only upon the one beloved; and, as he gazed upon the beautiful face that was upturned to his own, he would not have exchanged his dream of happiness for the most glowing certainty of "waking bliss."

For a few moments they remained gazing steadfastly at each other; but, at length, encouraged by the expression of his mistress's countenance, Frederic ventured to draw her more closely to him, and to touch her cheek with his lips. He was not rebuked, although she instantly withdrew herself from his clasp, and the measure of his joy was full.

"And now Sybil—my own Sybil," he whispered, "let us talk only of ourselves—of the long years of bliss which await us, and of our bright prospects for the future."

"Without one reference to the past?"

"What have we to do with the past?" was the eager rejoinder; "for me it is for ever annihilated."

"And have you no curiosity—none—to solve the mighty mystery which was to be to us what the wall was to Pyramus and Thisbe?"

"None, till you care to make it known."

"It shall be, then, the first trial of your truth," laughed Miss Delamere; "only pledging myself that you shall one day learn all that I have to tell, and warning you that it will scarcely repay you for the hearing, so infinitesimally small will be the amount of the revelation. But I will not wrong your generosity by volunteering an autobiography at this precise moment, lest you should suspect that I doubt your faith."

Frederic, more fascinated than ever by the affectionate and endearing gentleness of his beautiful betrothed, forgot all the difficulties and annoyances with which he was surrounded, to resign himself wholly to the spell of her fascinations. The dressing-bell rang unheeded: sufficiently adorned by the subdued happiness which was betrayed in

her every look and gesture, Sybil felt that she required no added charm in the eyes of her lover ; and it was only when a second summons to the dining-room reached them through a servant that she hastily wreathed a few flowers from a *jardinière* in her luxuriant hair, and offered her hand to Mortimer to lead her from the saloon.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE convalescence of Gertrude was slow but certain. Her youth, and the gentle and uncomplaining patience with which she supported her sufferings, proved to be efficient physicians, while their effects were strengthened by the deep and silent delight with which she remarked the affectionate anxiety and sympathy of her cousin.

She was no sooner able to leave her room than Frederic, whose conscience was not altogether at ease as regarded the origin of her indisposition, passed hours each day at her side, reading aloud from her favourite authors, or conversing on topics of general interest, calculated to amuse without exciting her.

Willingly, most willingly, would she thus have worn out her life. It seemed as though the one sweet dream of her childhood were indeed realised ; nor would she trust herself to look either backward into the past or forward into the future. The present was all in all to her ; and, as she saw her cousin move noiselessly to her sofa, and felt her hand in his, and watched all the little arrangements with which he busied himself for her comfort, tears of blissful gratitude rose to her eyes, and she forgot all her previous trials.

Nor was Mrs. Mortimer less happy than herself. Unconscious of the decisive interview of her son with Sybil, she, too, began to hope that older and better feelings were resuming their influence over his heart, and that a mere passing fancy had yielded beneath a sense of her disapprobation and of his own folly. Nor did even his daily absences from home shake this belief ; for she was reasonable enough to feel that, after his extreme

intimacy at The Grange, he could not, consistently with a proper observance of courtesy and honour, at once withdraw himself from the society of Mrs. Delamere and her daughter; while, that he could constantly pass hours in intimate companionship with Gertrude, whose pure and ethereal beauty was but the tangible and palpable reflection of her equally pure and beautiful nature, and remain insensible to the charm, appeared to her impossible.

Little did either of them suspect that there was a moral bandage before the eyes of Frederic, which rendered him blind to the perfections of every object save one, and that the kindly attentions which had been originally the mere impulse of pity and brotherly regard had increased and continued under the deeply-felt, although unconscious, happiness induced by the restored affection of his mother.

It is probable that, had Sybil endeavoured to dissuade him from his constant attendance in the sick-room he might have been led to contrast her egotism with the unselfish generosity of her rival; but, far from indulging in so dangerous a weakness, Miss Delamere encouraged him in his labour of love.

Gradually, however, as Gertrude regained strength his attentions relaxed. His devotion to her comfort became less marked, and his absences from home alike more frequent and more prolonged. It is true that while beside her he was still kind, and gentle, and affectionate, but it was soon apparent to the poor invalid that she was indebted to the regard of the cousin and not to the zeal of the lover.

The abstracted look, the frequent fits of absence, and, above all, the smile of release which Frederic had not tact enough to conceal as he parted from her, sufficed to convince her that the imaginary paradise in which she had lived for a few weeks must soon give place to a less glowing reality; and she braced up her strength to support the change as resolutely as she could.

Thus were things situated when a contagious fever was introduced into Westrum by a traveller, which spread rapidly among the poor, and created universal consternation. The native charity of Mrs. Mortimer was not, however, to be chilled by any personal apprehension, and

thus, despite the entreaties of her family, she continued with undiminished assiduity her periodical visits to her numerous pensioners, and, for a time, their fears continued to appear superfluous; when, urged by a desire to render the advantage obtained, as she supposed, by her niece over a dangerous rival more assured, she no sooner saw Gertrude sufficiently restored to render such a proceeding safe, than, affecting to believe that she required to be aroused from the moral lethargy consequent upon a long and enervating indisposition, she resolved to collect about her the friends by whom she was surrounded, and, by making her house more attractive, to obtain at once the twofold advantage of amusing her son in his home, and of affording to her niece an opportunity of displaying the personal attractions and mental qualifications with which she was so richly gifted.

Those friends were by no means numerous, but they were all selected, for Mrs. Mortimer preferred solitude to that species of social *pis aller* which tends to fill the drawing-rooms of less fastidious party-givers; and thus Dr. Jervis, the vicar, and his estimable wife, the local physician and his two well-educated daughters, and the families of the neighbourhood, few, but well-bred, constituted the whole of her circle.

One only objection offered itself to this arrangement, and that one existed in the impossibility of excluding from her hospitality the ladies at The Grange. Well aware of the *caquetage* of a country town, and fettered, moreover, by the unceasing attentions of Sybil to her niece, Mrs. Mortimer at once felt the utter impracticability of passing them over; but, less far-sighted than Gertrude, she had taught herself to believe that the danger which she apprehended was now overpast, and it was consequently with less reluctance than she would formerly have felt that she despatched a note of invitation, which was immediately and most graciously answered.

Nor was the delusion of the fond mother by any means extraordinary; for, superadded to the fact that she was familiar with all the estimable qualities of her niece, and knew how to appreciate at its just value the whole amount of her worth, it was no less certain that, to the

eye of the disinterested critic, the beauty of Gertrude far transcended that of Miss Delamere, radiant as it was, although it required more mind to appreciate the one than the other in a more common observer.

Thus Mrs. Mortimer flattered herself that after a time the quiet graces of her niece would entirely wean the heart of Frederic from the more artificial fascinations of Sybil ; and that to produce this desirable result, he required only to see her in the society of other females of her own age, and to contrast her with her associates. Herself gentle and domestic, she could not appreciate the attraction which Sybil derived from her superior knowledge of the world ; and, strong in the hope of success, she resolutely disregarded her own love of quiet and retirement ; and, to the surprise of those about her, declared her intention of no longer withdrawing herself from the hospitable advances of her neighbours. In order the more gracefully to effect her purpose, she had consequently resolved to open her own house ; and Gertrude, although sensitively shrinking under a feeling of the invidiousness of her own position, meekly prepared to play her part in this new trial.

The dinner passed off somewhat heavily ; for the art of dinner-giving is one of sufficient difficulty, especially in a limited neighbourhood, where all the parties are intimately known to each other ; but even here the perfect tact of Miss Delamere enabled her to infuse a certain portion of animation into those about her.

Gertrude, meanwhile, in her simple dress of white muslin, subdued in spirit, and oppressed at heart, contributed to the general conversation only by monosyllables ; and was effectually thrown into the shade by her more brilliant adversary. The languor of illness lent, indeed, a deeper charm to her beauty, but it was one little calculated to attract the mere pleasure-seekers by whom she was surrounded ; while the only eye which she sought to see turned upon her in affection, was rivetted almost incessantly upon the beaming countenance of another.

As the ladies rose from table Mrs. Mortimer felt painfully conscious that her object had failed, and that she had but afforded to Sybil a fresh opportunity of evincing the extent of her social talents ; nevertheless, she still hoped against hope ; and when, on reaching the drawing-room,

she saw her dreaded guest, after having, with almost child-like anxiety, provided for the perfect comfort of her mother, (whose constitutional helplessness continually rendered her dependant upon others even in her most trivial arrangements,) move to the side of her niece, and take her hand with an expression of anxious sympathy, her heart once more swelled, as she decided that nothing could be comparable to the pure beauty of the pale girl who formed so strong a contrast with the matured, and (as her prejudice impelled her to add) meretricious woman of the world, who was, even then, smiling over the ruin which had been her own work.

But while Mrs. Mortimer so judged, the reason of Gertrude was differently impressed. She felt and acknowledged all the superiority of her enforced companion; nor did the fact that since the first moment of her arrival she had been unable to detect even a glance directed towards Frederic, which implied a sense of conscious triumph or security, jealously as she had watched for such, undeceive her as to the power that she possessed over his mind and feelings.

Surrounded only by the ladies of the party, her looks were as bright, and her words as bland as ever; and seated beside Gertrude, with the hand which she had secured clasped in her own, no shadow of *ennui* could be detected, as she murmured out a thousand expressions of sympathy and regard.

The remainder of the evening passed off tranquilly and pleasantly. Agreeable conversation, and well executed music, made the time run swiftly; for none saw lower than the surface, nor could guess that aching hearts were here, as elsewhere, disguised beneath smiling brows. And yet so it was: Mrs. Mortimer had discovered, long ere her party separated, that she had been buoyed up by fallacious hopes; for that her son, in all that pleasant circle, saw and heard only Sybil, whose brilliant talents had constituted its main charm; while she had merely to glance occasionally towards her niece to feel convinced that she was sustaining a struggle but ill calculated to assist her convalescence.

It is true that she smiled as she conversed with those about her, and even acceded without difficulty to the proposal of Sybil, that she should accompany her in a duet well suited to display the finished execution of both parties;

and all this apparently without an effort ; but the anxious eyes of her fond protectress were not to be deceived. Well aware that the countenance of Gertrude was a faithful index of her feelings, she readily comprehended the sudden lapses into melancholy and depression, against which the unhappy girl waged so unsuccessful a warfare, and from which she started only to affect a gaiety that was foreign to her heart.

CHAPTER XV.

THE night was calm and still ; the moonlight lay clear and bright upon the lawn, and tipped the trees with silver ; and all was peace over both earth and sky, as Gertrude, after dismissing her attendant, extinguished the lights upon her toilette, and threw back the casement to steep her burning forehead in the fresh breeze that came, laden with perfume, from the blossom-teeming garden.

That evening had been to her one of intense and agonising struggle ; and never had she felt so desolate as now. True, she had before both understood and seen that Frederic was lost to her, but she had at least never before willingly and deliberately resigned him to another ; never before given to that other a right to consider him as her own. The womanly pride which had driven her to this alternative was now prostrate ; and a thousand reflections, each more bitter than the last, bowed her bruised spirit to the very dust.

How she despised the hollow gaiety which for hours she had assumed ! How she detested the hypocrisy which had taught her to belie her best and holiest feelings ! And how she shuddered as she remembered that the die was indeed now cast ! In short, Gertrude was miserable ; her heart was wrung, and her spirit crushed. Even hopeless as her attachment had long been, she still loved Frederic with an intensity so deep and absorbing, that he was the centre of all her thoughts ; and she had dwelt so fondly upon that one image, that the impression had become indelible. It was not passion with which she regarded him ; but the pure and gentle affection which, although warm and in-

tense, was yet veiled and subdued by the natural reserve of a modest and well organized mind.

Far different were the solitary reflections of Sybil, as she, too, at that still hour, breathed the soft air which entered at her open window, and passed in mental review the occurrences of the evening. Her large dark eyes were raised to the calm sky which glittered with its myriad worlds of mysterious light, and her head was pillowed upon her hand; while her long and luxuriant hair, from which she had detached its wreath of pomegranate blossom, and the combs by which it had been confined, fell in rich and profuse masses almost to her feet, and undulated in the passing breeze.

The scene would have been a fine subject for the artist. In the very depth of the spacious chamber stood a toilette table of ebony, surmounted by an immense mirror mounted in the same costly wood, and lighted by half-a-dozen wax candles in branches of or-molu.

Scattered over the table, and resting upon the drapery of antique point by which it was covered, lay a profusion of gems, among which the crimson garland had been flung, evidently in careless haste; and just within the reflection of the tapers gleamed out the white and delicate draperies of the bed, whose muslin festoons fell like a vapour over the hangings of pale pink silk, or were looped back by heavy tassels of the same colour and material.

The heavy curtains had been drawn back from the window, and, as Sybil leant there absorbed in thought, her features, with their varying expression, were distinctly visible in the clear cold light. Her eye was dancing with triumph, and a proud smile sat upon her lip.

But suddenly some unwelcome thought obtruded itself among these pleasant visions, and the brow of the lady darkened, and a shiver passed over her frame as though the night air had chilled her. The rich lips quivered for an instant and then became firmly compressed; while the slender fingers that were buried in her hair, by a simultaneous impulse, closed convulsively upon each other, as if to clutch some object that was about to escape them. Her breath laboured in her throat, and a moisture glittered in her eye; but, by a

violent effort, she flung off the emotion, and a deep flush rose to her cheek that dried the incipient tear, and seemed to endue her with fresh courage. She raised her head and glanced around her, at first haughtily and with an expression of defiance; but her slow and lingering survey was scarcely completed ere again brow and bosom became blanched, and she clasped her hands together so tightly that the blood appeared ready to spring from beneath the nails, as she murmured, almost inaudibly—

“It is too late to retreat! It is my last chance! I have perilled my all upon the die! I must succeed, or I am lost!”

Then, closing the window impetuously, and drawing before it the damask draperies to exclude the moonlight, she hastened to extinguish the tapers upon her table, and ultimately flung herself upon her bed in the darkness, still folded in her dressing-gown, and enveloped in the masses of her loose hair. It was clear that there was no peace of heart in that sumptuous chamber.

Gertrude, too, wearied at length of her reverie, but it terminated far differently from that of Sybil. At first a feverish irritation had rendered her unjust alike to herself and others; then a feeling of wretchedness and isolation had wrung from her some of those bitter tears which are never shed by the merely worldly and selfish, or comprehended by individuals of sturdy nerves and neutral emotions, who exact a *tangible* cause for every demonstration of feeling, and regard as folly every species of suffering which is merely moral.

Those tears, nevertheless, calmed the agitation of Gertrude; and having dried her eyes, and made her preparations for the night, she knelt down beside her bed to pray, without one remnant of bitterness or resentment.

Thus was she still engaged when hasty steps sounded upon the landing, and in another instant some one tapped at her door. She hurriedly rose from her knees and drew back the bolt, when she was met by the favourite maid of Mrs. Mortimer, who implored her to hasten to the room of her mistress, who had been taken alarmingly ill.

Gertrude flew rather than ran to the chamber of her aunt, whom she found partially supported by pillows, and gasping for breath. A deep red spot was burning upon

either cheek, and her eyes were veiled by a thick mist, which at intervals she endeavoured to sweep away with her fevered hand. In an instant the unhappy girl read the truth. Her affectionate protectress had imbibed the fatal disease which was then ravaging Westrum, and the fever was already at its height.

"Where is Mr. Mortimer?" she gasped out, almost inarticulate with terror; "where is Dr. Collins?"

"My master is gone himself to fetch the doctor, Miss," was the reply; "he left the house as we woke you."

With a throbbing heart the frightened Gertrude discovered at once that the disease by which her aunt was attacked was one of the most serious nature. Even during the few hours which had intervened since they parted in the drawing-room the change in her appearance was alarmingly visible. Her eyes were sunken and glazed; her respiration heavy and oppressed; and the surface of her skin dry and heated.

Nevertheless, the invalid endeavoured, with a forced smile, to soothe and reassure the trembling girl; but it was with difficulty that she could articulate even the few words that she addressed to her, or the confession that she had, throughout the day, been conscious of a coming indisposition.

On the arrival of Dr. Collins he pronounced the presence of fever, aggravated, as he believed, by the recent exertions of his patient, but, recommending simply some cooling remedies, and perfect quiet, declined to give a decided opinion upon the precise nature of the attack until his next visit; and then, having seen an effervescing draught administered, took his leave for the night.

The cousins were, consequently, left to their anxious watch; and it was with dismay that they traced the rapid progress of the evil. Fearful fainting fits were succeeded by perfect helplessness and torpor; and to these again supervened delirium.

Towards dawn, however, the consciousness of Mrs. Mortimer appeared to return; her eyes were fixed alternately upon the affectionate watchers beside her, and an expression of intense love passed over her features.

Gertrude was the first to remark the happy change, and, springing from her seat, she was in an instant bending over

the pillow of the sufferer. "Aunt! my beloved aunt, speak to me!" she exclaimed, clasping the scorching form of Mrs. Mortimer in her arms; "can I do nothing to relieve—nothing to ease you?"

A smile of gratified affection struggled upon the lip of the invalid, but she had no longer the power of utterance; and it was with trembling anxiety, and a painful foreboding of misfortune, that Gertrude busied herself about the sick-bed while awaiting the second advent of the physician.

On his next appearance, although he spoke cheerfully to the cousins, and bade them rather seek to secure themselves from the possible chance of infection, than fear for his present patient, they were not deluded by his words; for, familiar with the expression of his countenance, they at once read there a greater consciousness of danger than he was willing to admit.

Any personal precaution was, however, far from the thoughts of either; their only care was to forbid all entrance to visitors, and to limit the attendance of the servants to the dressing-room, reserving the actual cares of the sick-chamber to themselves; an arrangement which was, nevertheless, partially invaded by the attached attendant of the sufferer, who, having insisted upon her right to watch over her beloved lady, was reluctantly permitted to share their vigils. This done, Mortimer retired for a brief time to his room; overcome with dread, and, it may be, with remorse, as he remembered the unhappiness which he had lately caused to a fond mother, who might now be snatched from him for ever. Hurriedly he seized a pen, and seating himself at his desk, he wrote a few scarcely legible lines to Sybil, to inform her of the misfortune which had occurred, to forbid her approaching the house, and to implore her not to venture into Westrum before they again met.

The letter was instantly despatched; and, exchanging his coat for a dressing-gown, he hastened back to the sick chamber. As he entered Gertrude pressed her finger to her lip; and, on bending over the bed, he saw that his mother had fallen into an uneasy doze—the first interval of comparative repose which she had experienced since the commencement of the attack.

Nothing is more cheerless, nothing more depressing,

than the slow approach of daylight in a sick room. The window of Mrs. Mortimer's chamber had been thrown wide open, in obedience to the direction of Dr. Collins; and as the cold gray dawn began for the second time to glimmer over the distant heights which shut in the coast, the night-lamp sickened into a pale yellowish gleam. Upon the bed, and covered only by a light coverlet, lay the extended form of the sufferer; her cheek burnt with fever, her eyes dark and sunken, the pulses of her temples visibly throbbing, and her fitful starts proclaiming the unsatisfactory nature of her apparent slumber. Near her stood the thousand details which reveal the presence of illness, and beside her pillow sat Gertrude, pale it is true, but with a restlessness in her expression and an eagerness in her eye, which betrayed how thoroughly her whole being was absorbed in the duties of her watch.

No thought of self, no sympathy even with Frederic, occupied her at that hour. Her soul hung upon the abstract question of life and death which was so soon to be solved before her; and as a few incoherent words were occasionally uttered by the unconscious sufferer, she sank from the chair to her knees, and listened breathlessly, lest she should lose one sound of that cherished voice which might so soon be hushed for ever.

Nor was Frederic less worthy than his cousin to perform the filial duty to which he had bound himself. Pale and silent, he leant back in his seat, gazing upon the convulsed features of his mother, and starting painfully at every spasm which shook her tortured limbs, as though by some electrical sympathy it passed over his own frame; or watching with helpless hope every motion of Gertrude, as though he trusted in her power to solace and relieve the poor sufferer, while he felt his own uselessness.

No one thought, no one regret strayed to Sybil, as he sat there in that melancholy dawning; he saw only, felt only for the mother who had loved him so tenderly, and whom he had recently so ill requited. During his silent watch had he been offered her life in exchange of every other earthly good, he would not have hesitated for an instant to secure it.

Strange that neither to the one nor the other of these two devoted watchers came one reflection on the possibility

of their own infection ! Their sorrow was too sincere for selfishness ; there was no stage-effect in that sick room ; no striving at applause ; no craving for the empty praise of the idle and the uninterested. Even at this early period each felt a foreboding consciousness that there was no hope ; and their sole anxiety was to smoothe, in so far as human means and human devotion could do so, her passage to the grave who had so tenderly plucked away the thorns from their own path of life.

CHAPTER XVI.

DAYS passed over ; days so long and so heavy that it seemed as though Time had paused in order to prolong the trial ; and still Gertrude and Frederic watched unwearily beside what they knew to be the bed of death. No tear escaped them during the brief and rare intervals of consciousness which enabled the sufferer to recognise and to acknowledge their devotion ; it was only amid the fierce and fevered paroxysms of delirium that they indulged themselves in an outpouring of the anguish by which they were consumed, or suffered themselves to be overcome and prostrated by the melancholy prospect before them.

Even the hopeful words of their friendly physician had ceased to greet them during his frequent visits, nor did the anxious cloud upon his brow tend to re-assure their sinking spirits. Never absent for an instant from the sick room, save when they singly snatched a scant and hasty meal in the adjoining chamber ; driven even into this momentary desertion of their charge by the express injunction of Dr. Collins, who strenuously interdicted the useless and dangerous risk of swallowing food in an infected atmosphere, they became ere long careless and almost unconscious of ail beyond the influence of their own sorrow.

Ultimately, however, the increasing paleness and languor of his cousin struck Mortimer with a new terror, and he anxiously implored her to retire to her own apartment, were it merely for an hour, in order to secure a less troubled slumber than that which she had hitherto taken

upon her chair ; but Gertrude only shook her head with mournful resolution.

“No, no, dear Frederic,” she murmured, “I shall not long be called upon to watch ; leave me to my vigil. Am I not also her child ? And would you deprive me of perhaps the last sorrowful, but still deep happiness that I may ever know in this world ?”

And Mortimer, whose wretchedness would have been almost intolerable had he been called upon to endure it alone, could only press her hand with affectionate gratitude, and murmur out his low-voiced but fervent thanks.

And so they sat side by side for hours, listening to the meaningless words which at times fell upon their ears, full of tenderness and anxiety, and with which their names were constantly associated, or watching for a lucid interval in which they might once more catch a glance of recognition ; and whenever, for an instant, the attention of Frederic strayed from his suffering mother to his devoted cousin, he saw her with her eyes eagerly and earnestly fixed upon the convulsed features of her beloved protectress ; faint from weakness, but still strong in the courage of her love.

Frederic, too, was ever ready and active when his services were claimed, but he could not, like Gertrude, foresee the necessity of action. He guessed not when the pillow became uneasy to the aching head, nor when the parched lips needed the refreshing moisture. At times he overlooked, in his own sorrow, the precise moment at which the sustaining draught should be administered, or the position of the sufferer changed ; but the watchful perception of Gertrude never slumbered ; and he saw with wondering delight the expression of relief which, even amid her pangs, passed over the countenance of Mrs. Mortimer, as the gentle tendance of the watchful girl freed her from some unseen suffering.

All would have been comparatively easy to Gertrude, had she not, hour by hour, and day by day, been compelled to feel that her beloved aunt was unconscious of all which took place about her ; that she did not recognise her as she hung over her pillow, to murmur in her ear the accents of tenderness ; and that even the strong clasp of the fevered hand betokened pain instead of affection.

At the termination of a week, the friendly physician, having requested a private interview with Mr. Mortimer, feelingly but definitively assured him, that all hope of saving his patient was at an end, and that he conceived it to be his duty to prepare her son for an event which would in all probability take place within a very few hours.

"I am aware, my dear sir," he concluded, as he wrung the hand of the young man with a sympathy which was evidently sincere, "that your respected parent has no worldly matters to arrange, for, with her well regulated mind, she was incapable of deferring the performance of so serious a duty; and it is this conviction which consoles me under the apprehension that she may depart without one lucid interval sufficiently long or complete to enable her to follow up any definite idea. That she may, however, recover the necessary consciousness to recognise those about her I believe to be highly probable, and to this prospect we must therefore endeavour to confine our hope. But I should reproach myself hereafter were I not at this moment frankly to declare that, in all human probability, her sufferings will soon be at an end; and so thoroughly am I convinced of the fact, that I shall not again leave the house until all is over, but will remain in the breakfast-room with Mr. Nottingham, whom I have requested to be prepared with such restoratives as may be desirable, either for the poor sufferer herself, or for Miss Mortimer, who, in her present worn and weak state, will not fail to be seriously affected by the shock which awaits her."

For a time Mortimer was silent, overcome by the anguish of his feelings; but at length he rallied sufficiently to inquire if it would not be prudent to induce his cousin to leave the sick room before the awful moment arrived, and thus spare her the pang of witnessing the last struggle.

"You will undoubtedly do well to make the trial," was the reply; "but I fear that you will not succeed. In the hour of sorrow your admirable cousin appears to have no recollection of self. I remember her on a former melancholy occasion; and even amid my own regret for one of the most valued friends I ever had, I could not repress my astonishment and respect at her courageous and devoted conduct. Depend upon it, that throughout this new trial, therefore, she will not be less true to herself, although I

fear that her sufferings will be even more acute, for no child ever loved a parent more affectionately than she has loved her aunt. And now go, my dear young friend, I will not detain you another instant from your post. Should my presence become necessary, you can summon me on the instant; but until it is so I will not intrude upon the sacredness of your sorrow."

Mortimer obeyed, but his limbs almost failed as he again ascended the stairs, and approached what was so soon to be the chamber of death. When he entered he saw Gertrude upon her knees by the bedside, with her face concealed in the coverlet; but as she detected his stealthy step she raised her head, and looked eagerly and inquiringly towards him.

"What had Dr. Collins to communicate?" she asked in a low whisper, as her cousin reached her side.

"His apprehensions for your own health, my dear Gertrude, and his desire that I should induce you to retire for an hour or two to your own room."

"Ha! Is it so? Must it be so soon?" exclaimed the poor girl, wringing her hands in agony. "And he would ask me to leave her? But perhaps it was right that he should do so—a duty which he was called upon to perform—he meant well, I know. But you, Frederic, you, her son, will not echo such a wish. She will yet recognise me; I feel that she will—and I would not lose that last look, that last smile, for all——"

She could add no more; and, suffocated by her suppressed sobs, she once more dropped her head upon the bed; while Mortimer, as he hung over her, attempted no further argument, convinced that all interference upon such a point must prove ineffectual.

Two more dreary hours went by, twilight was rapidly shedding additional gloom over the sick chamber, and still Mrs. Mortimer lay in a state of torpor, disturbed only by the violent and unnatural labouring of her breath, and the spasmodic convulsions of her limbs, when suddenly she opened her heavy eyes, and looking earnestly into the gloom, feebly articulated, "Frederic—Gertrude—where are my children?"

In an instant they were at her side.

"My own dear ones!" she again gasped out, "come nearer—nearer."

They instinctively sank upon their knees, and each took one of her wasted hands in silence.

"We part—part for ever!" continued the trembling voice; "the world is passing from me—in peace;" and then, bringing together the hands which clasped her own, she added with increased difficulty, "Heaven bless you both—both, my own ones,—my children: I have had a fearful dream—but it was no more than a dream—I see, and feel its falsehood. Embrace me, both of you—both at once—let me die in the blessed conviction that——"

What she would have added they knew not, for she spoke no more; another earnest gaze, another beaming and happy smile, and the kindly spirit passed into that rest which was never again to be broken upon earth.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALL was indeed over. There was no longer any necessity for exertion—no longer anything to hope or fear. The darkened windows, the noiseless tread, and the deep stillness of the house of death, had succeeded to the tumultuous feelings, the weary vigils, and the agonising suspense of the previous week, and, for a time, Mortimer experienced that frightful void of heart which appears to the survivor as though it shut out all human sympathies, and is destined to be eternal.

But although he sorrowed, and sorrowed deeply, the despair of Gertrude was still more intense. No tears came to her relief; her feelings appeared to be annihilated; and she sat with clasped hands and eyes fixed on vacancy, unconscious of all that passed about her. In this moral prostration there was no shade of self; she did not remember that she was now indeed an orphan, penniless and homeless, who must hereafter battle for every foot of way which she made upon the world's path, or that she possessed no other affection upon earth to replace that which

she had lost: her whole being was absorbed in the one great grief of her bereavement.

For hours each day she sat beside the pale, motionless corpse, herself as pale and almost as motionless; nor was it until the morning of the burial that she was aroused into more demonstrative suffering. Then, indeed, the flood-gates of her grief were opened, and, to the great relief of Dr. Collins, she speedily wept and exhausted herself into a succession of fainting fits, which rendered her insensible to the departure of the funeral train, and calmed the apprehensions which he had begun to entertain of the results of her immeasurable and silent agony.

On his return he found her calmer. She even answered his inquiries and consented to see her cousin, although her lip trembled as she complied with the suggestion; nor could she, when he approached and took her hand, articulate one word of welcome or condolence. Frederic was deeply affected, and for a time even forgot his own sorrow in an attempt to soothe that of the fair and fragile creature before him. Theirs was a common grief, and each read the heart of the other without the help of words; while it was evident that, the meeting once over, they felt consolation in the presence of each other; and the worthy doctor, satisfied of the judiciousness of his arrangement, forced Mortimer gently into a chair, and then quietly retired from the room.

For a time nothing was heard save the low sobs of the faithful Roberts, whose services, being ended about her beloved mistress, had been silently and zealously transferred to her niece; but, ere long, the affectionate whispers of Mortimer broke upon the stillness, and were rewarded by the grateful tears of his dejected listener as they wept together over their mutual bereavement.

It was not, however, until, in the utter solitude of night, she could brood over her anguish uncontrolled, that Gertrude felt the full force of her loss, and even ventured to glance at a future which to her was fraught with terror.

So long as even the inanimate remains of her aunt had continued in the house she had been less isolated in spirit; but now all was gone; she could not even cling to the senseless clay; the grave had claimed its tenant, and her work of love was ended.

For several succeeding days Mortimer devoted his whole time to his cousin; nor did he once quit the house save when, with Gertrude leaning feebly upon his arm, he spent a short time in the grounds; and thus, although the stricken girl would not have admitted even to herself that it could be so, she was almost happy. Never had Frederic been so gentle, so affectionate; and when she occasionally endeavoured to speak of her future plans, he silenced her by asking if she were indeed weary of her home that she should seek another.

This state of things was not, however, fated to last. During the illness of Mrs. Mortimer several letters had been delivered to her son from Sybil; but, with the morbid feeling peculiar to heavy grief, he had shrunk from opening them while she was stretched upon a bed of sickness; nor could he even reconcile himself to do so until the first bitterness of his regret had passed over.

Time, however, soon produced its effect. The elasticity of the human mind is proverbial, and neither joy nor sorrow will endure for ever.

As we have elsewhere remarked, Mortimer could not live without feeling himself beloved, and this craving for an undivided and absorbing devotion naturally turned his thoughts to Sybil, when he began to marvel how he could have suffered her letters to remain unopened. He shrank from admitting, even to himself, that the last words of his mother had borne a reference to Miss Delamere by no means favourable to his passion, and that she had eventually expired under a delusion which his future conduct would, in all probability, negative; but it is not the less certain that those very words had tended in no inconsiderable degree to influence him in leaving the letters so long unread.

That he was once more acting ungenerously towards his cousin he never reflected; for, intent only on proving his gratitude for her devotion to his mother, he forgot that she was ignorant of his engagement to Sybil, and might possibly misconstrue the nature of attentions to which she had hitherto been unaccustomed, and unconsciously, even to herself, repay them with feelings which he had no desire to awaken.

Thus it was with no compunction as regarded Gertrude

that, having at length succeeded in silencing, even if he could not entirely subdue, the upbraiding of his own thoughts, he proceeded to examine the letters which had been so long accumulating, and, as he did so, Sybil rose before him in all her beauty and in all her love; while, as she wrote admirably, the spell deepened as he advanced in his task, until he felt his breast bound and his brow flush with happiness.

Not even his apparent neglect had been able to chill the warm outpourings of a heart which he felt to be all his own. Like her, he forgot the sufferings of his desolate and orphan cousin. Like her, he peopled the world with one all-sufficing object, and, like her, he felt that, although the cup of bitterness had been lifted to his lips, life could still offer a brighter and a better draught.

All the past as regarded Sybil came back fresh and glowing to his memory, and, while he refolded the letters, he breathed deeply, like one who had cast off a heavy weight of care; and hastily, but scrupulously, securing his newly-found treasure, he left his room, and proceeded to the sunny summer-parlour, in which he had spent so many hours of happiness in her society. There he felt that he could more fully appreciate the transport of being beloved, for there every spot and every object was replete with memories of her grace, her wit, and her accomplishments.

As the miser gazes enrapt upon his treasure, so did Mortimer linger over each and all of these—for each and all told of her who had become to him the universe; and he was so thoroughly absorbed in his employment that he continued unconscious of an arrival until the door of the apartment opened, and Sybil herself stood before him.

For an instant he remained motionless, for the deep mourning dress of Miss Delamere jarred upon the current of his thoughts, and almost brought with it a sensation of remorse; but the feeling lasted scarcely a moment beneath the soft and sympathising smile of his visitor and the tearful accent in which she murmured, as she advanced towards him with extended hand,

“My poor Frederic! And do I indeed see you thus—the mere shadow of your former self? Had you then so utterly forgotten the future in the present? Did no thought of Sybil and of her anxieties induce you to be

more careful of your health than I read in your pale cheek and your heavy eye than you have been? But I will not reproach you—no, not even for a silence which has wrung my heart, although it has never weakened my trust in your affection.”

“My own kind Sybil,” murmured Mortimer, as he drew her to his heart, and she suffered her head to rest for an instant upon his shoulder, “talk not to me of the past; you are here, and to me you are all in all. But you know not, you cannot guess, all that I have felt and suffered.”

“You deceive yourself,” was the reply; “and it is in order to induce you to break through the melancholy associations by which you are now surrounded that I am here. My visit is, as I need scarcely say, ostensibly to your cousin; but you will not require to be told that this early advent is caused by a deeper and a dearer anxiety. Frederic, you must no longer remain under this roof. The constant sight of objects familiar to you in other times and under other circumstances will tend to render your melancholy morbid and unnatural.”

“I know and feel the truth of all that you advance, Sybil,” said Mortimer, mournfully, “and gladly, most gladly, would I act upon your suggestion; but you forget that I am not free; that my poor cousin is still too weak to encounter the fatigue of a removal; and that I cannot abandon her in a sorrow which has been induced by me and mine.”

A slight colour rose to the cheek of Miss Delamere, and her fine brow contracted for a moment; but it was with even greater gentleness that in the next instant she raised her eyes to those of her companion, and said, slowly and emphatically, “It is you, Frederic, who forget the ready comments of a censorious world; and, although I know that for yourself you could despise them, yet have you no right to disregard their probable effect upon your cousin. You may tell me, in your turn, that I have disregarded them in my own person, and of this I am aware; for not even the presence of Miss Mortimer under your roof may to some appear a sufficient excuse for my thus venturing to visit a house which has no longer a mistress; but there are feelings which place us beyond such considerations, nor do I hesitate to admit that I have been swayed by

these. I could not know you to be unhappy, and sacrifice the joy of telling you how deeply I sympathised in your sorrow by any paltry fear of misconstruction; and I had been for so long a time deprived of the privilege of seeing you that I cast from me every other thought than that of the delight of blending my tears with yours. I felt the necessity of seeing you myself; of convincing you that in losing your estimable mother you had not lost *all*; and so long as *you* recognise and appreciate my motives I am careless of all beside."

"How shall I ever repay you for such affection?" murmured Mortimer, tenderly, as he raised her hand to his lips.

"By listening to my advice," replied Miss Delamere; "by looking calmly and dispassionately upon your position, and by admitting the reason of what I have already hinted. I will not speak further of yourself, for I believe you to be sufficiently unselfish to feel little interest upon that point; but, once more, remember the invidious position of your cousin. Young, beautiful, and, as one who was very dear to you never concealed, tenderly attached to you, do you imagine for a moment that she can thus continue alone to share your home and to absorb your attention without the greatest risk to her fair fame?"

"Who would dare?" exclaimed Mortimer, with a kindling eye.

"Many," replied his companion, steadily; "and those even among your most intimate associates. I feel that I give you pain, my dear Frederic, but the probe of the surgeon is frequently the only cure. You are misled by a false chivalry."

"Sybil," interposed her listener, "Gertrude has no other friend, save myself, on earth."

"And would you render that one worse than powerless?"

"You may be right, but I love her as a brother. How, then, can I abandon her at such a moment?"

"Simply by remembering the responsibility of your situation. Miss Mortimer is no longer a child; make her the judge between you."

"After what has passed I feel that I dare not. She has already too much cause of complaint against me."

"And do you believe that by augmenting that cause you can acquit yourself in her eyes? Need I say, Frederic," and again a shadow passed over the features of Miss Delamere of more than dubious expression—"need I explain to you how gladly I would have offered her a temporary home at The Grange had I not been conscious that I should only subject myself to the mortification of a refusal? Be it as you will, however. It is evident that I have deceived myself with regard to the extent of your interest in your cousin. Since you cannot part from her, my path is plain. I am once more taught to feel how greatly I overrate the affection of another when I test it by my own."

"Sybil, how have I deserved this?"

"Forgive me, Frederic, forgive me!" murmured Miss Delamere, burying her face in her hands; "you have made me very wretched, and I have not pride enough to conceal my disappointment."

"My own love!" exclaimed Mortimer, as he clasped her tenderly to his heart, "how little do you understand me! When you entered the room all around me spoke only of yourself. It was to commune with your image that I was here. Yes, although I visited for the first time since the death of my mother the apartment in which she the most delighted, I had forgotten all save you—all, save the hours which we had passed together on the same spot. It was to retrace a thousand memories of yourself that I was here. Sybil, you are my world—the very essence of my being—but I lay under a heavy debt of gratitude to my cousin, and I dare not even seem to forget its amount."

"Yet you wilfully risk the destruction of her peace—and mine."

And the tears of Miss Delamere forced a passage through her fingers.

"Sybil," said Mortimer, unmanned at the sight of her grief, "henceforward I can have no will but yours. Yet how can I explain an absence which will condemn her to perfect solitude in a house so lately visited by death? Will she not feel my departure as a wanton cruelty, which even her indulgence cannot excuse?"

"Not if you are frank; not if you sincerely place before her your real motive."

"Had she only secured another home," said Mortimer,

reluctantly yielding to an influence against which he was unequal to contend, "I should feel less hesitation in informing her of my purpose; but, save myself, poor Gertrude possesses only one or two very distant relatives, to whom she is utterly unknown, and with whom, even should they consent to receive her, she would probably be unhappy."

"What, then, are your future plans regarding her?" asked Sybil, suddenly raising her head, and looking steadfastly towards him.

"I confess that, as yet, I have not formed any," was the reply.

"Then listen to me," said Miss Delamere, as she took his hand, and met his eyes with a smile. "Both Miss Mortimer and yourself have a long future before you, into which each must look steadily and carefully. You owe her much, very much; and it behoves you to act at once with generosity and prudence. She *has* relatives, you say: arrangements may therefore easily be made for a time, until you have a right, consistently and irreproachably, to offer her a home under your own roof."

"Sybil, forgive me," exclaimed Mortimer passionately; "sorrow has made me weak and supine; and I indeed require your guiding affection. You are right, quite right. I am wilfully subjecting poor Gertrude to misconstruction. All shall be done as you suggest; and I trust that I have long years before me in which I may be able to prove how deeply I feel all that I owe her. But you have forgotten, dearest, that by this arrangement you are also banishing me from your own presence—sending me forth a wanderer without a beacon-light."

The eyes of Miss Delamere flashed, and her bosom heaved; but the smile was bland and the voice steady, in which she replied:—

"Talk not of me, Frederic; my faith in your affection will suffice until the departure of Miss Mortimer enables you to return to Westrum; moreover, we have a great resource in a perpetual and daily correspondence. And now my ungracious task is ended. My visit was to Miss Mortimer, but I doubt if I can longer await her coming; and I will, therefore, leave alike my greeting and my condolence in your hands."

"And what more leave you, Sybil?"

"My heart, my soul, my being: trifle not with the trust."

"Dare I believe so much?"

"Mortimer," said Miss Delamere, as she rose to depart, "I have been once deceived, and my life nearly paid the forfeit of my mistake; and yet I never loved *him* as I love you. Beware, therefore, if I am dear to you; for you know not, you cannot guess, all that your falsehood would involve."

"I shall never know it," whispered her companion, as he detained her.

"It would be, at best, a fearful knowledge," said Sybil with a slight shudder; "may it be spared to both of us!"

And so they parted.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANOTHER day had dawned; and the cold gray light, as it slowly spread over the eastern horizon, fell upon the kneeling figure of Gertrude Mortimer, who, with her face buried among the cushions of an arm-chair which occupied the deep bay of the window of her sleeping chamber, had remained throughout the whole long silent night motionless, tearless, and almost unconscious.

With the image of Sybil still bright before him, Frederic had summoned sufficient resolution to point out to his dismayed and astonished listener the probable results of their present mode of life; and his representations, carefully and even tenderly as they were made, opened before her an abyss of difficulty, which, in her innocence, she had never apprehended.

That any ungenerous comment could be elicited by her residence in the dear old home which had cradled her childhood, and under the roof of a cousin who to her was as a brother, had never entered into her imagination; but now the veil was rent away, and she saw all the wretchedness of her fate. It was true, too true, that she had no longer a right to feel herself the natural and authorized

inmate of that home—the legitimate companion of that cousin ; and at once the fearful question arose in her mind, where, then, am I to hide my sorrow ? From whom am I to look for sympathy and affection ?

Separated at an early age from all the relatives of her mother, by whom her very existence had probably been long forgotten, and to none of whom she could now be an object of interest, she knew not where she could apply even for shelter ; and although, when Mortimer awakened her to the truth, he had been careful to remind her that, by the will of her deceased aunt, she was entitled to a legacy of two thousand pounds, she had scarcely heeded the assurance. As she had heard it when it was first announced to her, so did she hear it now, for she had yet to learn the importance of the fact ; and the only impression which remained upon her mind, was one of gratitude for his earnest declaration that, let her dwell where she might, she would ever be to him an object of the dearest interest, whom it would be alike his pride and his delight to shield from every trial.

Poor Gertrude ! To her the past and the future were alike a blank ; while the present was fraught only with pain and difficulty.

And thus they had parted for the night, both depressed, both irresolute ; but with what different feelings ! Pained as he was, alike for his cousin and for himself, Mortimer was still able to relieve his anxiety and to mitigate his regret, by thoughts of Sybil, and visions of future happiness ; while the poor and desolate orphan crept to her solitary chamber to brood in silence over this new and unexpected trial.

Tears, slow and bitter, coursed each other down her pale cheeks, and hours passed by before she had even power to think ; she felt her misery, but she could not analyse it. At length, however, this mute despair exhausted itself, and a clearer perception of her real position forced itself upon her reason. Her wan cheek crimsoned at the idea of slander—slander, connected with herself, however undeserved ; and she tacitly acknowledged the propriety of her immediate separation from her cousin.

For awhile that one conviction overpowered her ; nor had she ever known until that night how tenderly and exclu-

sively she loved him. She knew it now, however; now when that one idea, the idea of living no longer under the same roof—of enjoying no longer his cherished companionship, annihilated all beside.

Then came another transition of feeling; less poignant perhaps, but still more frightful. She was to go! But *where?* She grasped her cold forehead with her burning hands, and tried to think. What a waste spread wide and blank before her! She could not remain at Westrum, where she must witness the progress of her cousin's suit, and hear the thrilling peal chime out the moment of his marriage. And Westrum had hitherto been her world; and all beyond was strange and new to her.

Mortimer was her last surviving relative on her father's side, and thus she found no resting-place for her weary heart, where she would willingly have sought it. Of her mother's family she knew no more than that two of her relations still existed: the nearest of whom was a brother, who by careful perseverance had realised a handsome fortune, which, by his unsocial and penurious habits, had been yearly increasing; but whose heart had long been closed against all his connections.

Gertrude gasped for breath as she recalled to her memory all that she had heard of him: his harsh unkindness to her consumptive mother—his insolent neglect of her widowed father—his utter abandonment of herself. To Mr. Sinclair she felt that she could make no appeal; to him she must be simply an object of grudging charity: an intrusive and unwelcome dependent. Of Miss Warrington, the maiden aunt of her mother, she knew little, save that she dwelt in a small village in Devonshire, where she contrived with some difficulty to make a very confined income suffice for her limited wants; but she was aware that every year a brief and formal, although kind, letter had arrived at Westrum from the old lady, desiring tidings of her own welfare, until she had attained the age of womanhood, when these periodical inquiries had suddenly ceased.

All this was bleak enough; and the timid and loving heart of Gertrude shrank tremblingly before the bitter trial of re-awakening a long dormant, and in all probability extinct affection in the bosom of an aged and unknown relation, of whose disposition, habits, and prejudices, she

was, moreover, utterly ignorant. Needy as she was, there was much reason to apprehend that she would, from motives of prudence, decline to burden herself with an inmate who could do little towards a decrease of her penury, and who might prove an incumbrance rather than a comfort; but cheerless and unpromising as the plan appeared, it was that upon which the unhappy girl decided. She felt that she could better support the privations of poverty and the exactions of old age, even although rendered doubly selfish by a life of solitude, than the insolent intolerance of purse-proud and heartless vanity, meting out its benevolence with a scornful lip and a niggard spirit.

Thus resolved, the orphan rose from her knees; and, drawing back the curtains which had hitherto shut out the daylight, seated herself calmly and tearlessly at her desk. She had wept over the past; she shrank from dwelling upon the present; but she nerved herself bravely against the future.

The task was, nevertheless, an arduous one, for she had no clue by which to guess how her communication would be received. She felt that she had no claim upon the kindness of the lonely old lady, and she said so with the same truthfulness which was constantly her habit.

Her painful task ended she closed the letter, once more shut out the light, and, throwing herself upon her knees, prayed fervently for strength to meet the result of her application, be it what it might; and then, calmed and comforted, she slept, and for a time forgot, in the deep and dreamless slumber of exhaustion, the weight of sorrow by which she was bowed almost to the earth.

In the morning, when the cousins again met, Gertrude summoned sufficient nerve to acquaint Frederic with her decision of the past night; but he, who had found it comparatively easy to paraphrase the reasonings of Sybil, felt his heart sink as he contemplated the actual position of the orphan.

"You are too hasty in your arrangements, my dear Gertrude," he said, anxiously; "as although, for your own sake, it is necessary that we should part for a time, it is by no means expedient or proper that you should quit the home of your childhood with a haste which would seem to imply that you were no longer a welcome inmate. I will

not dwell upon my own feelings in this emergency—they are too painful; but I must insist that you are just to yourself. You do not know, my dear cousin—and Heaven grant that you never may!—the myriad trials of poverty; the wringing misery of those perpetual and soul-draining expedients to which the well-born poor are subjected. You cannot share the privations of Miss Warrington.”

“I care not for poverty,” observed Gertrude, forcing a smile.

“Because you do not comprehend it,” replied Mortimer, gravely; “nor must you ever do so. I will not insult you by urging my right upon this point; let it suffice that it ought to be, and shall be, enforced. Be guided, I entreat of you, by me. In the first place do not, as yet, even dream of leaving Westrum. I will absent myself for a time, and this must be all that is necessary to prevent unpleasant remarks.”

“Never!” exclaimed Gertrude, energetically. “You shall not be driven from your home for my sake.”

“Will you not yield to my wishes, Gertrude? I have already much, very much, with which to reproach myself; do not deepen my self-blame by showing me that you disregard my advice. Are you not the sister of my adoption? Are you not——”

“Enough—enough,” gasped out his listener; “be your will what it may it shall be obeyed.”

“Do not speak so coldly,” said Mortimer, with emotion. “Only to know you happy, I would make almost any sacrifice. Let us, then, work together to this end, for it *must* be accomplished. Why do you not claim a home—call it so, if you will, though I trust soon to offer you one more genial—why do you not claim a home with Mr. Sinclair? He was the brother of your mother—your own nearest relation—and under his roof you will, at least, be secure of every luxury to which you have been accustomed.”

“I dread the price that must be paid for luxuries which I am contented to forego.”

“Do not be misled by what may, after all, prove to be a false apprehension. We have not communicated with him for years, and time, my dear Gertrude, works strange changes. Your uncle is a solitary, childless man; he must have passed many a weary hour, even amid his prosperity;

and, remember, that if he has remained silent during so many years, we, on our side, have made no attempt to dispel that silence. It may be that he will thankfully receive to his heart the child of his only sister, and should you once meet, the result cannot be doubtful. In any case, you owe it, both to yourself and him, to make the first appeal to his affection."

"I will do so."

"I thank you for your compliance; but let it be done cautiously; do not permit him to believe that you are dependent upon his acquiescence for a home."

"Upon what pretext can I, then, address him?" asked Gertrude, almost reproachfully. Mortimer buried his eyes in his hands, and remained silent.

"My dear Frederic," resumed his cousin, with a composure which grew out of the very bitterness of her anguish, "whatever I do, and to whomsoever I apply in my extremity, I must act with openness and honour. I have been the child of benevolence almost from my cradle; and, although the hand of charity has hitherto been extended to me so tenderly that I have never felt its weight, I must now learn to receive the bitterness with the blessing, and to be grateful for the boon, however offered. I cannot approach my uncle with a vain sophistry upon my lips; I must present myself as I am; I need a home, and it is from him that you have willed for me to ask one. I will write to Mr. Sinclair since you desire it, but it must be as I have written to Miss Warrington; and I have a firm conviction that our correspondence will soon terminate."

"The whole affair makes me wretched," murmured Mortimer. "I feel that I am wrong, and yet——"

"Wherefore accuse yourself?" asked Gertrude, affectionately. "You have acted towards me with the frank and upright principle which I had a right to expect from you. I am weak, I know; but I will not prove unworthy of you; of those——"

Tears stopped her utterance, and Mortimer, no longer able to contend with his emotion, seized his hat and hurried from the room.

Much had passed during the interview that was soothing to the feelings of Gertrude, but nothing which had lessened the difficulties of her position. She was still helpless and

homeless, and the new task which had devolved upon her of addressing Mr. Sinclair was the most mortifying trial to which she had been yet exposed.

That he would receive her as an inmate she did not for an instant anticipate, and she consequently felt that the suffering was gratuitous; but it was Frederic's desire that she should at least offer him the alternative, and she was content to abide by his directions. The letter was, therefore, written in deep sorrow, but with perfect resignation; and the days which necessarily intervened before an answer could arrive were among the most cruel of her life.

It came, however, at length, and, cold, brief, and insulting as it was, she experienced a sensation of relief on finding that he definitely declined her proposal. He was sorry, he said, that those who had reared her as that most useless of all created beings, a fine lady, had ultimately left her a beggar, although such a climax might have been expected, and it could not be rationally anticipated that he, who, from motives of prudence, had remained a bachelor, would voluntarily encumber himself with a person about whom he knew nothing, and who could advance no claim upon his kindness. He wished her well, and warned her to be prepared for mortifications and trials of all sorts, which it would be impossible for her, situated as she was, to avoid; but he hoped that, by humility and industry, supposing that she possessed any talent sufficiently useful to be turned to account, she might ultimately be able to make her way in the world. And this was all. There was no word of sympathy, no sentence of encouragement. The gulf between them yawned wider and blacker than ever, and she had no refuge save in the compassion of the poor and solitary Miss Warrington.

Mortimer had awaited the reply of Mr. Sinclair before he left Westrum, and it was with a feeling of bitter indignation that he perused it. His first impulse was to hasten to town, in order to seek an interview with the cold-hearted worshipper of Mammon, and to impress upon him the unworthiness of his conduct, and the responsible position in which he stood towards his last surviving relative; but from this measure he was dissuaded by Gertrude herself, who meekly represented that her uncle was fully borne out in his assertion that she had no claim upon him, save that

which his own heart might have afforded her, and who declared her willingness rather to suffer any privation than to intrude herself again upon his notice.

Mortimer argued in vain; for once his cousin was resolute. The very extremity of her position had nerved her with a factitious courage.

"I have still a hope," she said, forcing back the tears which rose to her burning eyelids; "I have still one relative who may feel for my orphan state, and with whom I shall be safe from the comments of the idle and the malevolent. My tastes are simple, for I have never forgotten that I was indebted for all the blessings by which my youth has been surrounded to the goodness of others; and thus I have taught myself to comprehend that I might one day be called upon to resign them. Go, then, in peace, my dear cousin, and rest satisfied that, in one way or the other, I shall soon be enabled to send you an assurance that your anxiety upon my account may cease."

"Could I but see any means by which your departure from hence might be rendered unnecessary," broke in Mortimer.

"There are none, and I ought earlier to have foreseen the necessity of my removal; nor can I find any excuse for my want of prudence, save in my ignorance of society and the extent of my mental suffering. Now, however, all is clear to me; and, for my sake and your own, it must no longer be deferred. By to-morrow's post I shall forward my letter to Miss Warrington; and, should that fail, I must learn to suffice to myself."

"You do not comprehend the trials of which you talk with so much calmness."

"It may be so," said the poor girl, sadly; "but it is a knowledge which will soon be acquired, and must be accepted with philosophy. And now let us rather speak of your departure. Like my letter, you must leave Westrum to-morrow, and I shall be better able in solitude to arrange my plans and brace myself to whatever necessity may arise."

"You will write to me frequently—daily, Gertrude?"

"I can scarcely promise so much, but directly that I have anything to tell, you shall hear from me. And now,

Frederic, let us part at once ; you have much to arrange, and your time is short. I, too, need rest. To-morrow we shall meet again before your departure ; and, meanwhile, we do but unnerve each other."

"You are perhaps right," said Mortimer, irresolutely ; "and yet——"

"Not a word more, my dear cousin, if you would spare me," murmured Gertrude, almost inarticulately, and Frederic attempted no further expostulation ; but, drawing the drooping girl to his bosom, and pressing his lips to her pale brow, he gently replaced her upon her seat, and left the room.

As he disappeared she swept back her dishevelled hair, fixed a long look of anguish upon her mourning dress, and then, bowing her head upon her hands, remained motionless.

She felt like one in a frightful dream ; all about her appeared unreal ; the floor rocked beneath her feet ; and old familiar objects wore a strange aspect that chilled her to the very heart. She almost doubted her identity—and yet it was all too true ; the dimness of her vision passed away ; and the truth, the frightful truth, stood cold and bare before her.

Slowly, but steadily, she rose from the sofa, and for awhile her hand wandered over the thousand cherished trifles that were strown upon the table before her. Her eyes were tearless, and her lip never quivered. Hers was the very desolation of the spirit to which tears are refused !

CHAPTER XIX.

'MY DEAR NIECE,—

"You have acted prudently and properly. You cannot, and must not, remain one day longer than is absolutely indispensable under the same roof with your unmarried cousin. A young woman's reputation is like a sheet of white paper, and people are ready enough to scrawl upon it when they can.

"I am glad, for your own sake, that Mrs. Mortimer has behaved so handsomely, for there is no blessing like independence. It has been the comfort of my own life, that I am independent of every body.

"I hope that you are not a beauty—I detest beauties—and that you are not a gad-about; I never go out except to church; and not often even there, owing to my deafness. If you are notable we shall get on famously together, for I have a great respect for the usefuls; and where people are not over rich they must be managing.

"I have given orders to have all prepared for you, so you will have no trouble when you arrive, and will have time to look round.

"Drop me a line to say when I may expect you; and keep up your spirits, for I have long learnt the folly of fretting for what cannot be mended.

"Travel as cheaply as you can; money spent upon the road leaves nothing to show for it, and is waste at best. When I travelled I always carried a provision basket, and found it a great saving.

"As we shall so soon meet, I shall reserve all further advice for future occasions; and only add, with my respects to your cousin, that I am,

"Your affectionate aunt,

"MARTHA WARRINGTON.

"P.S. I open my letter to bid you wrap up carefully. Sore throats are easily caught at this time of the year."

Gertrude gasped for breath. She had once more a home, and she was thankful. It is true that a few words of consolation and sympathy would have cheered her shrinking spirit; but there was at least kindness in the quiet and matter-of-course manner in which her unknown relative had at once opened her house, if not her heart.

She felt that no time was to be lost, and she resolved to obey the directions of her new mistress to the letter. Earnestly, therefore, she commenced her simple preparations. Everything that she possessed she owed to the generosity of her departed aunt; and now, when she was about to quit for ever the home of her lost happiness, she felt as though her ownership in all had ceased.

In vain did the weeping Roberts entreat and expostulate;

Gertrude was firm. One by one she rejected the proffered elegances which she had been accustomed to call her own, replacing each in its proper position, and scrupulously refusing to herself the gratification of retaining the most trifling object not absolutely necessary to her personal comfort.

At length all was ready: the modest packages were made; the chaise that was to convey her to the county town, whence the coach in which she was to travel to her destination took its departure, was ordered for the morrow; and then, and only then, she sat down to acquaint Mortimer with her proceedings. To have done so earlier would have been to summon him home only to renew a parting which to her had already been a trial almost beyond her strength; to have, perhaps, subjected herself to receive him as her companion during the journey, and thus to have prolonged her suffering, and incurred the risk of exciting the displeasure of Miss Warrington, who had evidently been unprepared for such an arrangement.

For the last time she wandered in silence and sorrow about the grounds; and for the last time she flung herself upon her knees beside the bed upon which her loved protectress had so lately lain stretched in death. Then came the parting with the old and attached servants, who had known and loved her from her childhood; and she had to part from one and all with a closed hand; but she meekly explained her inability to repay their affection by aught save words and wishes, for which they blessed her as she went; and she at length flung herself into the chaise, and, drawing down the blinds, wept unrestrainedly, as she was borne away from her home—her friends—her memories—and her hopes.

Poor Gertrude! The measure of her misery was full. She had drained the cup of bitterness to its very lees, and still she was like a seared autumnal leaf, driven onward she knew not where, the very sport of fate.

And so she travelled on day and night, unconscious of fatigue, and only aroused to the necessity of sustaining nature by the officious suggestions of her fellow-passengers; nor did she shrink away even from the ungenial contact with the voluble and the busy, or from the unaccustomed food which was placed before her; she neither heard the

first, nor heeded the second. Her thoughts and her memories were alike her only companions.

At last her dreary pilgrimage was over, as the coach stopped at a wayside inn to change horses, where a peasant lad civilly inquired if one Miss Mortimer were a passenger; and having received an affirmative reply from the coachman, approached the window, and, touching his hat, announced himself as her guide to Bletchley, which lay off the main road.

A short note from her aunt, desiring her to follow the messenger, and to leave her luggage at the inn until the evening, when she would send a cart to transport it to its destination, left her no alternative; and alighting from the vehicle, worn and weary as she was, she prepared for this new exertion.

Ere she had walked many minutes, however, she felt thankful that it was necessary, for her way lay through rich fields ripening for the harvest; then bounded a pleasant copse, where the nuts hung in clusters above her head, and finally led her along the margin of a little stream, whose ripple ran cool and bright over a bed of pebbles. The birds were singing merrily in the boughs, the sun was shining cheerily in the heavens, and the soft breeze bathed her fevered forehead in freshness.

What a relief was this from the stifling atmosphere, and the noisy discomfort of the moving prison in which she had been so long immured! Wretched as she was, she felt the bland and blessed influence of nature; and, as her rustic guide trudged on silently beside her, she strove to shake off her depression, and to make an effort to meet her new friend with composure and self-command.

On any other occasion the fatigue of such a walk would have overcome the slender strength of the orphan, but now it gave her time for reflection; and as they approached the village, she remarked with delight the modest church, half overgrown with ivy, which stood apart upon the summit of a gentle rise, at whose base the rivulet wound placidly along, while its downward slope was studded with the humble graves of the villagers, and grazed by innumerable sheep. All seemed calm and peaceful; and, save where one straggling street formed an ungraceful line in the centre of the picture, the modest cottages peeped out, each

from its nest of leaves, and she already found herself wishing that in one of these she was about to find her home.

It was, consequently, with a feeling akin to disappointment, that she saw her guide make directly for the central street, and after having traversed it to a third of its length, open the gate of a dingy, grim, brick house, separated from the pathway by a stripe of gravel inclosed within an iron palisade. Her heart swelled, and her spirit once more sank ; but this revulsion of feeling was happily interrupted by the apparition of a female figure upon the threshold. It was evident that some one had been watching for her arrival, and the very fact conveyed a welcome.

This conviction lent her new energy ; and when the extended hand and the feeble voice convinced her that she had interpreted its meaning aright, she could only murmur out a few inarticulate words as she suffered herself to be led into the dwelling.

She had just left the balmy fields, the benignant sunshine, and the fresh breeze of heaven, beneath which her heart had expanded, and her sorrows had for awhile been hushed ; and again she suddenly found herself surrounded by gloom, and that bleak discomfort which strikes upon the sense even before the eye has become cognisant of its cause. But she repressed the sigh which was rising to her lips, as she endeavoured to reply to the friendly greeting with which she was received. Miss Warrington had again sunk into her chair as she entered the apartment ; and it was not until she had slowly removed her bonnet, that Gertrude ventured to glance towards her new protectress.

When she did so her eye fell upon a tall and meagre form, so rigidly upright that the attitude was almost painful to contemplate, from the impression of restraint which it produced. It seemed impossible that any emotion, however powerful, could relax the rigid sinews of the frame, or the hard muscles of the countenance, while every fold of the tightly-fitting and dingy black dress, and every plait in the snowy neckerchief and cap, appeared to partake of the same precision. The gray hair was banded smoothly over a forehead upon which long years and worldly trials had alike failed to impress a wrinkle, while the dim eyes, the long straight nose, and the tightly-compressed and slender

lips, completed a picture little calculated to inspire other feelings than those of timidity and apprehension.

The apartment was low and dark ; and it was easy to perceive that every article of furniture had occupied its present position from the moment in which it had become the property of its owner ; the heavy and unwieldy chairs appeared to have grown to the walls against which they were ranged in straight lines and even distances ; the antique table, with its claw feet, had worn a dint into the floor, and its polished surface was guiltless of a stain ; the tall bureau loomed dark and rigid in a recess beside the fire ; and not one vestige of actual inhabitation, not one trace of the every-day occupations which lend a grace and a gladness to every home, however humble, of which they form a part, was perceptible throughout the room.

An instant sufficed for this ungenial survey ; and then, shivering with a chill which seemed to be coursing through her veins like a stream of ice, the unhappy Gertrude withdrew her eyes from the blank around her to fix them once more upon her companion.

The old lady had, meanwhile, been as busily occupied in examining the person of her niece ; and it would have been easy for any one accustomed to interpret the expression of her almost inflexible countenance, to discover that she was not entirely satisfied with the result. She became, if possible, a line more upright ; her thin lips were drawn a degree more tightly together, and her bony fingers were more closely clasped. Even through the dimness of her failing sight, she had already ascertained that her new inmate was a beauty !

The first solecism of poor Gertrude was an attempt to place her bonnet, which she had held for a considerable time in her hand while answering the inquiries of her aunt regarding her journey, upon the uncovered table.

“ You will excuse me, my dear Miss Mortimer,” said the old lady, as she solemnly waved her back with her hand, “ but I do not allow anything to be placed upon that table, until I am assured that it is free from dust, and can do no mischief. As we are to live together, we had better understand each other at once. If your bonnet fatigues you, be good enough to place it upon a chair.”

Gertrude obeyed in silence. Her heart was wrung.

"I have no doubt that we shall get on very well before long," pursued Miss Warrington; "that is, as I remarked in my letter, if you are simple and quiet in your habits, as, indeed, under your present circumstances, you will require to be. But now, I dare say, you will be glad to go to your own room, and rest yourself after your journey. You will find all prepared. I have, indeed, gone to some slight expense in order to make you comfortable; but you are welcome to all that I can do, and I hope you will approve of my arrangements."

Gertrude faltered out her thanks; and the old lady, having rung a hand-bell which stood within reach, she hastily followed the staid middle-aged servant by whom the summons was answered, up a dark and narrow flight of stairs; and, with a feeling of relief impossible to describe, at length found herself alone in the apartment which had been allotted to her.

Her first impulse was to cast herself upon her knees, to implore strength and support in her coming trials; and to offer up the mute thanksgivings of her spirit for the home which had received her, when she might have been a desolate wanderer in the wilderness of the world. This duty performed, she rose, and glanced with some interest round the narrow room that was now her own. All was scrupulously clean and orderly; the uncurtained bed was covered with a counterpane of snowy whiteness; the painted table was similarly adorned; the solitary window was draped with festoons of dimity, and overlooked a garden shaded by tall old trees; the mantel was decorated with an oval piece of satin embroidery, representing the parting of Hector and Andromache, in a black frame; and the walls had been newly whitewashed.

Poor and rude as all these arrangements were, Gertrude, nevertheless, felt grateful, and endeavoured to believe that she should soon cease to regret the absence of the elegancies to which she had been accustomed, in the luxury of solitude.

Long, therefore, ere she was summoned to the tea-table of Miss Warrington she had recovered sufficient calm to meet her, with at least apparent cheerfulness, and she made the effort the more readily, that she was conscious how little her sorrow was likely to be met by sympathy,

and how much it might be misconstrued and perhaps resented.

It was, however, with a sensation of pleasure that she found herself introduced into a less formal apartment than that in which she had at first been received; when, after having smoothed her hair and bathed her eyes, she again descended from her chamber. True, all was chilly, formal, and methodical, in this new parlour also, but still it was less appalling than the state-room, which had evidently been opened in honour of her arrival. The gaunt bureau was replaced by a small writing-table; the chairs were capable of transport; and upon the table stood the cheerful tea-equipage, flanked by a pair of candles; while upon a set of swinging shelves suspended from the wall, rested half-a-dozen volumes of divers degrees of antiquity.

Miss Warrington, in a roomy and upright chair of time-polished mahogany, was already established before the tea-tray, as rigid, as passionless, and as correct as before; but the accent in which she invited her guest to seat herself was kind, and even gracious.

"Your baggage has arrived, my dear niece," she said, as Gertrude ventured to approach a chair, "and by this time to-morrow you will be quite at home. For a while, at least, you will have no leisure to be dull: for this is a busy season at Bletchley. We have preserves to make, and wine; and I have no doubt that you will willingly relieve me of so great a responsibility."

"I almost fear——" commenced Gertrude timidly.

"Fear what?" asked the old lady, somewhat sharply, as her pinched lips became thinner and closer, "surely you do not mean to say that you are ignorant of so simple an accomplishment?"

"I must, I believe, plead guilty to this ignorance," replied the orphan with a sad smile; "but I shall rejoice to learn all that you may be kind enough to teach me."

The first feeling of Miss Warrington was evidently one of intense surprise and displeasure, but this was soon rebuked by the submissive manner of her young relative.

"Well, well," she said encouragingly, "the fault is perhaps not your own; and, if you are indeed willing, as you say, to learn, it may still be repaired. But, bless me, Miss Mortimer, how did you employ your time?"

"In reading, madam, in painting, or with my instrument or my needle."

"Then you *can* work? That, at least, is something, and may be made useful in every family; but reading, painting, and playing are mere waste of time, and can be turned to no account."

Gertrude sighed in silence.

"I am glad to see," pursued the old lady, after a pause, and still in the same monotonous and sententious accent, "that you are at all events free from the silly love of dress; the amount of your packages has already convinced me of that fact."

"I have brought with me, madam, merely my mourning," replied Gertrude, devouring the tears which forced themselves into her eyes, "nor do I apprehend that I shall ever wish to throw it off."

"And you are right, quite right," said Miss Warrington, totally misapprehending the sentiment of the assurance. "With good management nothing is more economical than black. I have worn it for years, and therefore speak from experience. Fortunately, we have no shops at Bletchley—at least, none of those shops that are the Vanity-fair at which young women barter their prudence for finery. We are quiet people at Bletchley, and have nothing to do with the idle nonsense of fashion."

And so passed the evening—wearisome and flat, and almost interminable. Not a sentence was spoken by the lady of the house which did not bear some reference to that gnawing, grinding, ever-present necessity, which is enforced by slender means coupled with the pretension of gentility. Every action, every thought, and every effort, was ruled by the one leading principle; all were to tend to the same object; nothing was to be said or devised or undertaken which did not acknowledge as its aim the furtherance of some petty economy, or some puerile saving.

Gertrude was bewildered. She felt like one in a new world, and her spirit quailed under the consciousness of her utter inability to comprehend or to assist the views of her enforced associate. Frederic was right. She had indeed talked too lightly of trials which she had never

comprehended, of a struggle which she had been unable to foresee. Hers had hitherto been the poetry of life—she was now about to be initiated into its prose.

CHAPTER XX.

THE receipt of his cousin's letter at once hastened the return of Mortimer to Westrum, which he reached in the hope that he might anticipate her departure. We have already shown that he failed in his object, nor was his regret lessened by the desolate sensation created by the aspect of a companionless house. Amid all his self-blame—for that he did feel much is certain, however unwilling he might be to admit the fact to himself—his annoyance was, moreover, increased upon perceiving around him every object on which his eye had been accustomed to rest, and of which he was well aware that Gertrude was the actual owner. There stood her piano, and he knew the value that she attached to it; here were her books, the chosen friends of her retirement; nay, the key placed in his hand by the weeping Roberts, and which opened a small inlaid cabinet—the bequest of his dead father to a niece whom he loved as a child—soon convinced him that, even to the graceful ornaments which all women prize so highly, she had left everything behind.

For a time Mortimer felt as though there were a tacit reproach in this self-denudation on the part of his absent cousin, but a moment's reflection enabled him to do her better justice, and he was deeply impressed by the intuitive delicacy of her proceeding.

His first care was to give earnest instructions to Mrs. Roberts to cause everything, however trifling, which had been the property of her young mistress, to be carefully collected; and, this done, he accompanied the willing waiting-woman through the principal apartments, and bade her point out every object for which she had heard his cousin profess any preference or regard, and add them to the rest. The packages were then made, and the heart

of Frederic felt lighter as he saw them driven from the door.

Poverty could not now subject his cousin to *every* species of privation, and the period of her exile must soon terminate, for had not Sybil, his own high-hearted Sybil, reminded him that her proper home would soon be beneath his own roof? Frederic had forgotten that women seldom forgive even a shadow of rivalry.

The letter which he had despatched to Gertrude to announce the departure of her property was almost buoyant; for, delighted to have thus, in some degree, made compensation for his other shortcomings, he forgot, in the prospect of her temporary gratulation, the more enduring evils by which she was surrounded; and, after reproaching her for leaving Westrum without affording him the opportunity of accompanying her to her new residence, he reminded her that, ere long, he should reclaim her at the hands of her present hostess, and painted the future in colours bright enough to scare her spirit as she contrasted them with the hues of the present, and felt the utter impossibility of their ultimate realisation.

It was, consequently, in an enviable frame of mind that he started on the following morning for The Grange. Sybil was not yet apprised of his arrival, of which he had abstained from acquainting her, anxious to enjoy to the fullest extent the delight of her surprise; but, before we accompany him to this new meeting with his affianced bride, we must conduct our readers to the luxurious abode of the proud beauty, and introduce them to a new acquaintance.

Among the other characteristics of the pleasure-grounds of The Grange was a long walk fringed with superb laurels, which traversed an exotic shrubbery at some distance from the house, and formed a delightful retreat during the more sultry portion of the day.

As Mortimer was leaving Westrum two persons entered this walk, one of whom was Miss Delamere and the other a stranger, upon whose arm she leant, as, in earnest and engrossing conversation, they moved slowly forward.

There was a singular expression of mingled triumph and apprehension on the brow of Sybil, while the features

of her companion wore a restless and anxious look totally at variance with his apparent character. He was a tall and finely-formed man of about thirty years of age, with large light-blue eyes, fair hair, arranged after a foreign fashion, a marked and somewhat salient nose, and a beard closely cut and encircling his chin—a mode now designated *en collier*, but which was, at that period, totally unknown in England. A decided air of fashion, and even of pretension, could be detected through the extreme but evidently studied simplicity of his dress and bearing; and there was an expression of haughty superciliousness about his mouth, which he found it impossible at intervals to suppress.

“And you are really happy, Sybil?” were the first words he uttered after a pause, during which his eyes had been rivetted upon the fairy-like feet of his companion.

“Certainly.”

“I dare not believe it possible.”

“And wherefore?”

“Because you once loved me. Deny it not—you loved me.”

“Is this intended as an insult, Sir Horace?” asked Miss Delamere, as she suddenly paused, and, withdrawing her hand from his arm, looked proudly in his face.

“Pshaw!” muttered the stranger through his clenched teeth, at the same time repossessing himself of the liberated hand, and again leading her forward; “do you connect the idea of insult with your love? Be more rational, charming Sybil. You are too clever a tactician, too accomplished a woman of the world, to imagine for a moment that it is simple curiosity which had led me to intrude upon you on this occasion. You cannot think it, and must be well able to solve the riddle. Tell me, then, why am I here?”

“I am no *Œdipus*,” was the cold reply; but the heart of the lady beat tumultuously, and her eye fell as she compelled herself to answer, “You must e’en play the *Sphinx* yourself.”

“You will not help me to a solution?”

“I cannot.”

“Nay, then, since you are resolved, I know you well

enough to feel all the fruitlessness of persisting further; and yet your woman-heart——”

“Would you assume the right to control my actions?”

“By no means; I am not so rash. If I found it impossible to do so when I possessed that right, I should scarcely venture to make the attempt now. But I confess, that when I remember the slender amount of the wreck of your father’s fortune, and the exact addition which was made to it, I cannot comprehend the splendour by which you are surrounded.”

“Miracles may be wrought even in the nineteenth century,” said Miss Delamere quietly.

“So I perceive; but will not the bubble burst?”

“Before I answer your question you are bound to answer mine. What brings you here?”

The gentleman did not immediately reply; but, after the pause of an instant, said resolutely, “A passion which I cannot overcome.”

“And yet,” faltered Sybil, evidently panting with emotion, “after what has passed——”

“True; after what has passed, you have a right to be astonished at my presence; and yet, Sybil, you must feel at once that where you have been loved, you never can be forgotten.”

“You are complimentary.”

“I am, at least, sincere.”

“Is your haughty mother cognisant of this new caprice?”

“Call it what you please,” said her companion, as he clasped in his own the small hand that rested on his arm; “I will not cavil with you for words. No, *bella è cara*, my mother knows not that I am here; knows not, in fact, that I am in England; nor will she even be aware that I have left Florence, if you consent to my wishes, so rapidly will we wing our way back.”

A singular expression passed over the eloquent features of his listener, as she asked somewhat bitterly, “And your suspicions—how are they to be laid at rest?”

“I must exert my philosophy,” was the reply, but the tone in which it was uttered implied more uneasiness than pleasantry. “A year hence, Sybil, and from what I see around me, I am quite aware that you must be penniless.

The fates only know why you have chosen a wilderness like this for so gorgeous a display, or what benefit you expect to derive from it ; for here there cannot exist a single being capable of appreciating you."

"Be it so," said Miss Delamere.

"Now, I would remind you how devotedly, how earnestly I loved you, and with what reluctance I lent myself to the wishes of my family, even after I discovered that it was in vain to hope that I could ever inspire you with an equally absorbing passion."

"Do not believe it," said Miss Delamere scornfully ; "I have no faith in the constancy of your sex. No, no, Sir Horace ; you, who were scared by a phantom, when I was unscathed by a single breath, cannot now, in sober earnestness, come to claim the hand which you formerly rejected."

"I come to reclaim the heart."

Sybil started. A shiver ran through her veins ; her pale lips parted, but she could not articulate a syllable.

"You tremble, Sybil," continued her companion ; "and yet, what can you fear ? Look dispassionately at our mutual position. I am free and wealthy. My presence here to-day must convince you of the extent of my love. You are madly braving a certain and a swift-coming destruction, from which I would fain save you. It were idle to expose the reasons which render it impossible that I should offer you my name ; but my heart, Sybil—that heart which you first taught to feel—is all your own. Will you reject its homage ?"

"Why do you pause, Sir Horace ? You see that I listen calmly."

"In short, Sybil," faltered her companion, I trusted that, recklessly as you might rush upon your own ruin, you would not willingly involve your mother in the same suffering ; and that I should be able to induce you to spurn the comments of a world by which you have already been wounded, and to restore both yourself and her to legitimate affluence."

The self-command exhibited by Miss Delamere as she listened was almost frightful. Her lips were ashy pale, and the veins about her temples swollen almost to bursting ; but her step was steady, and her head erect. It would

have been impossible from her manner to analyse the feeling by which she was possessed.

"Have I deceived myself, Sybil?" pursued the low passionate voice; "will you not be mine as I have loved to dream? A life of devotion shall repay the sacrifice; you shall not breathe a wish, you shall not indulge a vision, which I will not hasten to gratify. Speak, dearest; do I plead in vain?"

A strange wild smile flickered upon the lips of Miss Delamere; and, encouraged by her silence, and an expression which he misinterpreted, her companion ventured to throw his arm about her waist. He encountered no resistance; but while he drew her towards him, a bitter and hollow laugh broke from her lips, as, bending her head, she whispered in his ear—

"Neither ruin nor disgrace await me, Sir Horace Trevor; I am an affianced wife?"

Then, turning upon him a look of haughty defiance, she withdrew herself from his clasp: only, however, to perceive, at the distance of a few paces, Mortimer, evidently overpowered by emotion, standing directly in her path.

For an instant she quailed, but only for an instant; in the next she advanced towards him with a radiant smile and an extended hand, exclaiming blandly—

"Ha! you are welcome, truant. I was just beginning to weary of my newly-arrived cousin, who is practising all his pretty fascinations upon me on his way to one whom he loves better. And when did you return? Do not venture to tell me that you have been more than an hour at Westrum, lest I resent so glaring a proof of indifference towards the friends who have been long and anxiously awaiting your re-appearance. And now I must make you known to my relative, Sir Horace Trevor. Horace, this is Mr. Mortimer, of whom we were just speaking."

And as they were successively named, the gentlemen exchanged a cold and haughty bow, which augured unfavourably for their future good understanding, and at a single glance Miss Delamere thoroughly appreciated the inimical feeling with which they met; while, uncertain of the extent of what Mortimer might have seen or heard before she became aware of his presence, she hastened to introduce an irrelevant subject of conversation.

"And thus you are still wedded to Florence, Horace," she said, as if pursuing a former topic. "In truth, I am by no means astonished at your resolution. You know that with me, also, beautiful Italy has always been a favourite dream."

"Then why not return there?"

Sybil stole a glance at Frederic, who was walking silently by her side, ere she replied with a smile—

"My movements are not always under the control of my wishes; many things may occur to prevent such an expatriation—at least for the present."

"What woman wills, fate wills," said Sir Horace with emphasis; "and especially when that woman is Sybil Delamere."

"Alas! how well you know to the contrary."

"Certainly not from my experience of the past. You may have thwarted the projects of others, but I believe that you have in general been tolerably successful in accomplishing your own."

"*Et tu, Brute!*" exclaimed the lady with a light laugh, which, however, failed to disguise a certain feeling of anxiety and restlessness; "but I ought to have remembered that it is dangerous to tilt against you in a war of wits. Talk, therefore, if you please, of any one rather than of myself, for you will mislead Mr. Mortimer into a belief that I am a very dangerous person, an idea which I am very sure has never yet occurred to him."

"I congratulate your friend upon the personal qualifications which have enabled him to remain blind to the fact," replied Trevor sarcastically. "You did not know Miss Delamere in town, Mr. Mortimer, immersed in pleasure, surrounded by adorers, and the very arbitress of fashion, or you would have feared to approach her here, where you were exposed to the whole artillery of her blandishments. Do not be deluded into the belief that she is to be encountered with impunity. I—her cousin—warn you of your error."

Sybil bit her lip; and Mortimer, still too much irritated to trust himself with words, answered only by a slight bend, as Miss Delamere passed her hand through his arm, and leant upon it, as though she clung to him for support.

"Truly this Grange affair is a strange whim," pursued the incorrigible Trevor; "I leave you in a crowd; yourself the busiest mote quivering in the sunbeam, and I find you here built in, like a delinquent nun, between four walls."

"I was weary of the turmoil to which you allude."

"Weary!" echoed her interlocutor. "Not so, fair lady, if I know anything of human nature, and, above all, of woman-nature."

"You have faith in nothing," replied Sybil gaily.

"And am I to declare this to poor Captain Fitz—what was his name?—whose head you turned for a whole month, and whose heart was only saved from destruction by the fact of its having already been regularly broken once or twice every season for the last five years?"

"You may declare it to a whole military phalanx."

"But not to Prince Gustave, surely, Sybil?"

Despite all her self-command, the hand of the lady trembled upon the arm that supported it, and her eyes flashed with irritation; but the expression of triumph which she read upon the features of Trevor made her rally in a moment; and it was with an affectation of interest which betrayed her inward emotion that she exclaimed—

"Ha! Apropos of the poor young Prince—where is he now parading his listlessness? I have not heard of him since I left town."

"We have been residing together in Florence."

"Together!" echoed Sybil with a start, and evidently for once thrown off her guard.

"*E perchè non, la mia bella?*" asked Sir Horace. "Did you not yourself encourage our acquaintance? And could you believe me to be formed of so coarse a clay as to be unable to appreciate the delicate porcelain of your exquisite friend?"

Mortimer listened in silence, but Miss Delamere could feel the violent throbbing of his heart as she walked beside him. Fortunately he had not been required to join in a conversation which turned upon persons with whom he was unacquainted; but this exemption had only enabled him the more fully to note every word which had been uttered by either party; and the longer he listened,

the more painfully he felt in how false a position he stood as regarded the past life of the woman to whom he was about to unite his fate.

He thought of his buried mother, and sighed.

Ere long Miss Delamere was struck by the altered expression of his countenance, and, apprehensive that the conversation of her new guest had impressed him to her disadvantage, she hastened, with her usual tact, to turn it upon himself, well aware that the mention of his own name could not fail to arouse him from his untimely reverie.

"Yes!" she said, in reply to some observation of her more loquacious companion, "therein, at least, you are quite right; and Mr. Mortimer himself is a breathing evidence of the truth of your remark."

Frederic started as he heard himself named.

"How so?" asked Sir Horace, listlessly; "are the gay deceivers of our sex to be found upon every soil? Surely here, at least, you should have escaped."

"And yet I have done the very reverse," said Miss Delamere, in a tone of light gaiety which grated unpleasantly upon the ear of her lover. "I buried myself, as you see, in order to live entirely for my own fancies and feelings; but my star had ruled it otherwise, and I only rushed upon my fate."

"And am I to imply that Mr. Mortimer is that fate?"

"I must even permit you to do so; but, believe me, the fault has not been my own," said Sybil, with a smile, for which, only on the previous day, he would have forfeited a year of existence.

Now, however, even that smile could not overcome the feeling produced by the indelicacy of such a communication made in such a tone. Shocked by her levity, Mortimer could only stammer out a few disjointed words. "And," Sybil continued, "now you will probably be better able to understand why I have ceased to regret town and its gaieties. For pleasure I mean to exchange happiness, and to substitute affection for admiration."

"Mr. Mortimer little suspects how many enemies he has succeeded in making," sneered Trevor; "he will soon discover that he has created a shoal of envious adversaries who will never forgive so heinous an act of

piracy as that of carrying off the brilliant and coveted Miss Delamere."

"You speak emphatically, Sir Horace," said Mortimer, with a clouded brow.

"And I have cause to do so," replied Trevor, composedly. "You have disarranged all my own plans also. My errand here was to induce my fair cousin to return with me to Florence, and you have most inauspiciously crossed my path; for I should have succeeded, Sybil, should I not," he asked, with an expression of eye and lip which flooded her brow with crimson, "if you had not given Mr. Mortimer a right to hold you back?"

"In any and every case your failure would have been signal," said Miss Delamere, with a haughtiness which she had not previously displayed towards him; then, as if fearful that she risked too much, she added, carelessly, "My mother, as you are aware, detests the water, and is not young enough to make a perpetual pilgrimage of her existence. We were about to leave Westrum for the continent a short time back, but my wishes were overruled."

And again she looked earnestly and affectionately in the face of Mortimer, as if to recall to his memory by whom and how they had been contravened.

Still, alike pained, displeased, and disappointed, Frederic could only reply by a constrained smile. Willingly would he have found himself alone, for the pulses of his forehead laboured almost to pain, and he felt quite unequal to the effort of taking part in a conversation which jarred upon the sensitiveness of his nature; but he could not endure the idea of leaving Sybil to the society of her cousin, who had already become odious to him. By his officious appearance he had torn away the veil which never should have been raised, and had revealed to him the woman whom he loved divested of half the spell by which she had hitherto been environed. He was conscious, too, that he had exhibited himself most disadvantageously to this supercilious stranger, who not only possessed the privilege of a relationship which authorised him to become a guest at The Grange, but who was also cognisant of the past—that past which he now felt must influence all his future life—that past, of

which he had until to-day been careless, but which now, phantom-like, scared him as he glanced towards it.

Reluctant as he was, however, he felt that the effort must be made.

Feigning, therefore, suddenly to remember an enforced appointment, he drew out his watch, and, declaring that he had already exceeded the given time, he hurriedly took his leave: but not before Sybil had tenderly murmured in his ear, "Farewell, then, till to-morrow, my own Frederic! Remember how earnestly I shall wait and watch for you."

CHAPTER XXI.

WHEN he reached his desolate home he threw himself upon a chair, and abandoned himself to a train of bitter and upbraiding reflections. He could no longer doubt that he had been deceived; that, deluded by his vanity, and misled by a headstrong passion, he had become the easy prey of a heartless and manœuvring woman. The pang was a bitter one; and, as he remembered the pure and unselfish affection which he had recklessly flung from him, he bowed his head upon his breast, and a tear stole into his eye. For an instant he resolved never to see Sybil again; she was not yet his wife; and he would leave her free to exert her arts upon another victim; but this resolution failed as suddenly as it had been conceived; he might indeed liberate Sybil, but he could not free himself from the spell which she had cast about him. Even now, even at the moment when he mentally acknowledged her probable unworthiness, he was rather inclined to curse the intrusive cousin who had opened his eyes to her demerits, than her in whom they existed. For weal or for woe he felt, indeed, as she herself had expressed it, that Miss Delamere was his fate.

"When once she is really mine," he murmured to himself, "she shall, at least, renounce all intercourse with this sarcastic cousin, who has suddenly come be-

tween us like a blight, and, meanwhile, I will watch her narrowly; not a word, not a gesture, shall escape me which bears reference to the past. In order to comprehend my position fully—even although by so doing I should but be meeting regret and disappointment on the very threshold of my married life—I will garner up every inference and every allusion; and thus, day by day, and hour by hour, I shall learn something of her past existence—something which may tend to acquit her in my eyes, or which must render me supremely wretched.”

Nevertheless he resolved, on the following day, to abstain from visiting The Grange. He had a plausible excuse in the accession of business which had supervened on the death of his mother; and even amid his anxiety to watch the proceedings of Sybil he could not overcome his dislike of her cousin.

Suddenly a servant entered the apartment, and placed a letter before him. He glanced listlessly at the address, and then, with an eager gesture, tore it open. He had at once recognised the handwriting of Miss Delamere.

“We cannot part thus”—these were its contents—“I must see you before you go, were it only to hear from your lips what I have already read upon your countenance. I do not seek to upbraid or to reproach you—you have, perhaps, mistaken both yourself and me, and I desire only to learn the extent of that mistake. I love you too well to murmur, and I forgive you if you can forgive yourself. Sir Horace has gone; in my present state of mind I could not tolerate society. You only leave Westrum to-morrow; there is yet time for you to devote one half-hour to the unhappy

“SYBIL.”

Mortimer sprang to the bell, ordered his horse, and in ten minutes was on his way to The Grange.

Sybil loved him—she was unhappy—and Trevor was gone! All his suspicions were at an end; they had been dispelled like Alpine mists before the morning sun.

And so time passed on; and Frederic, who had vowed to himself that, ere long, he would possess every secret of Sybil’s heart, spent hours and days at her side, care-

less and forgetful of all save the present. Even the memory of Sir Horace Trevor had almost ceased to be distasteful to him from the cold and indifferent manner in which he was constantly mentioned by Miss Delamere; nay, he began to accuse himself of absolute folly and injustice to the fascinating creature whose every feeling and anxiety were evidently bound up in himself, and to marvel at the weakness he had betrayed.

Had Sybil loved her cousin he would have won her, doubtless, years before; for that he, or any man, could fail to return her affection appeared to Mortimer impossible. Yet, nevertheless, and incongruous as the fact may seem, he clung to his present mode of existence without one effort to enhance his happiness by at once making Sybil his wife.

Weeks and months sped on, and if a shadow occasionally fell upon the bright brow of the lady it was soon chased by smiles. All her tastes, all her avocations, were made subservient to the wishes of Mortimer. She was at once his friend, his counsellor, and his idol.

Their solitude was almost uninvaded; for, although the gentry of the neighbourhood were ready to admit the fascinations and accomplishments of Miss Delamere, they were not the less jealous of her attractions and suspicious of the mystery by which she was surrounded; while those among them who had been the familiar friends of Mrs. Mortimer could not see without regret, and even blame, the effect of her blandishments upon the destined husband of their banished favourite.

Thus, then, nothing intervened to ruffle the smooth current upon which the lovers glided along the stream of time; and this circumstance was favourable to Sybil, inasmuch as it afforded her ample opportunity to pour out all the stores of her well-cultivated mind and brilliant fancy; and each night as he rode slowly homeward, dazzled and more enthralled than ever, Frederic marvelled how so bright and gifted a being could be content to pass her days in an obscure retirement, and to lavish upon him alone all the treasures of her intellect, and all the fascinations of her beauty.

He had quitted Sybil on one occasion after an evening

of calm and rational enjoyment, enhanced by the exertions which she had made to "hold his reason prisoner;" they had sang together all his favourite melodies; they had sat together over the same chess-board, more engrossed by each other than by the game; and, while Mrs. Delamere slumbered, or seemed to slumber, in her chair, they had built up a thousand airy castles, each more soft and sunny than the last.

The chain woven by Sybil's lover was bright, but the connecting link was, nevertheless, wanting; he said nothing which could convert that future into the more immediate present, and thus she waited and watched in vain, and they parted even as they had done on every previous occasion, without one word from Frederic which implied a wish to realise his visions by their early union.

And she had borne this strange and almost humiliating uncertainty for months, believing each day that the morrow would terminate her suspense, and that morrow had come and gone and brought no explanation. What could it mean?

Suddenly the bloom faded from her cheek and the light from her eye. Could he have learnt the history of the past? Her limbs tottered, and she sank upon a seat. With the rapidity of lightning her thoughts glanced back to the visit of Trevor. Had he indeed betrayed her? But, no, that was impossible; for never had they been alone together, while the feeling of avoidance which each had exhibited towards the other was also a guarantee that such could not have been the case.

Then she remembered that Mortimer had, during the removal of Gertrude, been absent for many days in town; whom had he met there? With whom had he held communication? Could he have encountered any of her former friends, and questioned them as to her past history? And, if so, what was the meaning of his subsequent conduct? Did he dare—did he consider himself authorised to sport with her feelings, with her fate, with her very existence?

The doubt was almost too terrible to bear; and, as she sat in silence, with her hands tightly clasped together,

the large drops of emotion started on her brow, and her breath laboured until it escaped audibly from between her clenched teeth.

The brilliant beauty was crushed and bowed; and in that moment Gertrude was revenged.

Every day and every hour of suspense heightened alike her alarm and her difficulty. She reflected with terror that her youth was gone, and that did she now fail in effecting the object for which she had striven so zealously, the failure might be fatal. She could not hope long to retain the bloom which characterized her beauty, and her position was desperate! Mortimer alone could save her, for ruin was approaching with giant strides, and she had no other resource.

"Something must be done," she at length gasped out, unconscious of her own utterance; "I must know all—all that is before me. I cannot endure this gnawing suspense, and live. He must speak, and speak clearly. But how compel him to this? He is weak and suspicious, and startles at a shadow—and yet he must speak out. Either he is in my power, and I am safe, or he has played me false, and all is over. Trevor cannot have betrayed me—he can know nothing—or, should it be otherwise——" her voice died away in a hoarse whisper, and once more all was silence.

Suddenly a thought flashed across her, and a withering smile rose to her lip as she approached a writing-table, and seated herself before it. For a few moments she remained buried in thought; and then, slowly and earnestly, she began to write. It was evident that the task which she had undertaken was no light or easy one, for she progressed in it slowly, and appeared to form not only every word, but even every letter, with consummate care and study. But at length it was completed; and, after having attentively examined the contents of the paper, she folded it with equal deliberation; and then, having selected a particular seal from a number which lay upon her desk, she closed the letter, and threw the seal that had secured it into the fire, which was still smouldering in the grate.

This done, she remained for a while silently gazing upon the decaying embers, as if jealous lest they should

fail in their work of destruction ; but she no sooner saw the glittering ore melt and disappear, than she returned to the table, took up the letter, and, having concealed it in her bosom, calmly, and with renewed self-possession, rang for her maid, and retired to her own apartment.

On the following day Sybil was invisible even to Mortimer. Indisposition confined her to her chamber ; and, after lingering for a couple of hours about the grounds, and sauntering to and fro beneath her windows, in the vain hope of obtaining at least a glance of her figure as she traversed the apartment, he was compelled to return home ungratified. Nor even then could he compel himself to any occupation. A whole day without Sybil overcame his philosophy.

Nothing sufficed either to interest or amuse him. He felt no apprehension as to the result of her illness, for Mrs. Delamere had treated the matter lightly, declaring that it was only a head-ache, and that Sybil was subject to head-aches when she over-exerted herself, which she had done lately, and she had warned her of the consequences. However, Sybil knew best, and in all probability would be quite well again on the morrow. Thus there was no cause for anxiety ; and Mortimer was at liberty to bewail his own dreariness, to feel the wretchedness of his echoing rooms, and to comprehend his utter dependence upon another.

At an early hour on the morrow he was at The Grange, and this time he was admitted without difficulty. Miss Delamere had left her chamber, and was already in the southern parlour. He needed no announcement, for with this ceremony he had long dispensed, and opening the door softly he entered. But his arrival produced no change in the attitude of Sybil, and he was instantly struck by the change in her appearance. She was lying upon a sofa with her face buried among the cushions. Her hair was drawn away from her forehead, and gathered into a large loose knot at the back of her head, evidently without care ; a morning dress of white muslin was rather folded about her than adjusted to her figure ; and there was an air of negligence about her whole person so foreign to her usual habits, that it at once bespoke the presence of some overwhelming sorrow.

Mortimer detected this at a glance, and in an instant he was by her side.

"Sybil, my own Sybil, what has happened?"

Sybil started, and raised her head; and if Mortimer had been struck by the change in her general appearance, he was still more startled by the alteration of her countenance. A deep crimson flashed upon her cheeks, her swollen eyelids betrayed a night of tears, her lips were pale and quivering, and her hand trembled as he took it in his own.

"Speak, my beloved! Tell me, what is the meaning of this wild grief?"

"Frederic," she murmured almost inaudibly, "I dare not!"

More and more bewildered, Mortimer gazed upon her like one in a dark dream; but she was unhappy, she was crushed beneath some weight of sorrow, too great even for her to bear, and he forgot at once all save his love: "Nay, you *shall* speak, Sybil! Sybil, are you not mine? Have I not a right to share your grief, arise from what cause it may? Should you have any secret from me?"

But Sybil was still silent, although her sobs became audible.

"Lean on me, dearest! There, hide those swollen and weary eyes upon my bosom, and tell me all," pursued Mortimer more gently; "you know not what you make me suffer by this suspense. To see you thus, and to be refused your confidence, is more than I can bear. Have mercy on me, Sybil, and tell me what mean these tears!"

Miss Delamere only shook her head despondingly.

"You wound me deeply, Sybil," said her lover; "but I will not urge you further. I shall appeal to your mother."

"Frederic! Frederic!" gasped out his companion, as she flung her arms about him to retain him in his seat; "for pity's sake—for mine—if I have indeed been dear to you—breathe not a word of this misery to my poor mother—it would kill her did she know its cause!"

"Torture me not, then, my own love!" implored Frederic, as he yielded to the pressure of the beautiful arms which still rested upon his neck, and sank upon his knee

beside the couch ; “but let me learn from your own lips the cause of this violent emotion. Have you lost a friend ? Your fortune ? Your gestures deny this. Has any one dared to injure or insult you ?” And the eyes of the speaker flashed as he put the question.

A more violent burst of grief was its reply.

“Yes—I have guessed aright !” he exclaimed vehemently, as he sprang to his feet with a bent brow : “and now, Sybil, I entreat no longer ; I *insist* upon an instant explanation of this mystery. As my future wife, I command, in this at least, your obedience. Your honour is in my hands, and none shall dare to sully it by a breath.”

For a moment, but only for a moment, Miss Delamere, thus adjured, buried her face in her hands. When she withdrew them she was pale even to ghastliness, as she took a letter from her bosom, in which it had been concealed, and with averted eyes held it towards her companion, who, scarcely less agitated than herself, tore it hastily open.

As he hurriedly devoured its contents, the whole frame of Mortimer shook with suppressed rage, and he gnawed his lip as though he would have wreaked that vengeance upon himself which could not be poured out upon his enemy.

“It is a goodly scrawl !” he at length exclaimed bitterly ; “the work of a vile incendiary, who has not dared to affix his foul name to the revolting slander. But it is false, false as hell, Sybil ! No tongue has dared to prate as this assassin states—no thought has ever polluted your fair fame. Again and again I swear to you that it is false ! Have I for one moment concealed my purpose in frequenting your house ? Is it not notorious throughout the neighbourhood that I have been for months a suitor for your hand ? Is not your own mother beneath your roof ? Out upon such devilish but puny malice—my very heart heaves against the coward lie !”

“How am I sunk !” sobbed Sybil.

“Sunk ! Nay, dearest, rather say how are you exalted in my eyes by this jealous sensibility to all that touches your honour. Never to me have you seemed half so noble ; but, I beseech you, calm your grief ; it cuts me

to the soul, for it shows me that it is I who have armed this writer with his unhallowed weapon. Yes, Sybil, it is I, who, spell-bound by the happiness of the present hour, have too long forgotten that I have as yet enforced no right to its continuance. It was too much to hope that a meddling world would leave us to our holy and hallowed affection until we had placed it beyond the reach of comment and suspicion. There is a serpent in every Eden, and the crawling reptile has now invaded ours. But there is a remedy, and we will delay it no longer; the snake will be innoxious when we have robbed it of its venom."

A smile shone through the tears of Miss Delamere; and, as again Mortimer resumed his seat beside her, she gradually suffered herself to be consoled by his ardent and affectionate reasoning. Once more the colour returned to her cheek and lip, and she hung upon his words with an earnestness that made him doubly eloquent. She said little, but that little sufficed to convince him that he was the happiest of mortals; and as they sat with their hands locked together, and her head pillowed upon his shoulder, he almost blessed the anonymous correspondent who had revealed to him the moral excellence of his beautiful and injured Sybil.

"And now, my own one," he said tenderly as he prepared to depart, "we have each sufficient occupation both for our thoughts and for our time. You need rest, however; and while you strive to obtain it, I will not lose a moment in seeking out the vile author of this atrocious calumny. Let him not hope to escape. It is not so easy to disguise any handwriting as it may appear to be; there are always some peculiarities, trivial and slight perhaps, but nevertheless perfectly susceptible of identification, by which the writer may be traced with proper care and caution; and trust me, your present correspondent shall not escape."

"Frederic," whispered Miss Delamere with an appealing look, "will you consent to make me *quite* happy?"

"Can you doubt it, Sybil?"

"Then, love, restore to me that letter and let me destroy it."

"Do not ask me what I cannot grant. I will not be cheated of my vengeance."

An expression of intense anxiety passed over the features of Miss Delamere, but she instantly recovered herself, and, with her sweetest smile, she again extended her hand, as she said emphatically, "This is the first time that I have ventured to claim a favour at your hands, and I will not be so denied. To me your present intention brings a twofold anxiety. First, Frederic; answer me—how can I feel one moment's peace while I know you to be engaged in a search which must at once irritate and pain you, and by which, if you are successful, you only involve yourself in newer and more dangerous difficulties?—while, as regards myself, do you imagine for an instant that I can be happy while such a document is in existence? No; until that bitter and blighting scrawl is destroyed I *must* be wretched, for does it not brand me with disgrace?"

"Enough, Sybil, enough!" exclaimed Mortimer, as he folded her in his arms, and pressed his lips upon her forehead; "you have conquered, and I forego my vengeance."

"My own dear Frederic!" murmured one of the sweetest voices in the world, as the torn fragments of the obnoxious letter fell in a shower upon the carpet, "now, indeed, I know that you love me."

Five minutes afterwards Mortimer was gone; and Sybil, having listened to the sounds of his horse's feet until they were lost in the distance, slowly rose from the sofa, and carefully gathering up the shreds of paper, threw them one by one into the fire which was blazing in the grate; and then, having satisfied herself that they were all destroyed, cast one long triumphant look round the apartment, and threw herself again upon her seat.

CHAPTER XXII.

SEVERAL months had, as we have already stated, elapsed since the death of Mrs. Mortimer; and Time, that great physician of the mind, assisted by one of the most amiable and unselfish dispositions in the world, had restored Gertrude to comparative happiness. Grateful for the protection which had been so frankly afforded to her, at a period when it was sorely needed, she had studied to accommodate herself to the exigencies and peculiarities of her aged relative with a good faith which insured her ultimate success. And already the effects of her gentle influence were palpable, not only in the general appearance of the gloomy little house, but also in the manner of its rigid mistress.

The arrival of all the orphan's domestic treasures had at first grievously annoyed and disturbed Miss Warrington; who, as she saw package after package unladen from the heavy road-waggon, which nearly blocked up the narrow street, clasped her hands tightly together, compressed her lips until they became almost invisible, and sat bolt upright and speechless, until she comprehended, from the exclamations of her matronly attendant, and the expostulations of the two sturdy porters who were engaged in carrying the things into the house, that not only was the entrance-passage entirely choked up, but that the kitchen-stairs, and even the kitchen itself, had likewise been invaded. Then, indeed, she recovered in some degree from her consternation; although it was only to express her dissatisfaction in a cold, dry, sarcastic tone, which to poor Gertrude was more painful than the most violent exhibition of temper.

"Really, Miss Mortimer," she said, and not even the tension of her lips relaxed, as she looked her full in the face, "I feel that I have been very inconsiderate. You must have found yourself terribly inconvenienced in my house before your furniture arrived; and I greatly fear that you will even now be at a loss to dispose of it consistently. My passage is scarcely wide enough for a piano; nor do I think that bookcase will accord particularly well with the

general style of my property. But, perhaps, you have an idea of moving to a larger residence."

"My dear madam!" exclaimed the orphan, as she sprang forward and seized the reluctant hand of the querulous old lady, I do not know what to say to you—how to apologise. I was not aware—"

And poor Gertrude, who was already overcome by the munificence of her cousin and the affectionate letter which had accompanied his gifts, burst into an irrepressible flood of tears.

"Nay, nay, niece, this is foolish," said Miss Warrington, less harshly, "I dare say that you did not expect such an unloading of the Tower of Babel as this," (the good lady's verbal illustrations were usually somewhat confused,) so don't cry, for that will not clear the passage; and it will be necessary that we should get upstairs to bed. We had better, therefore, be thinking of what had best be done. Two cases of books?" she ejaculated, after an instant, as if unconsciously, "Who on earth is to read them, and where are they to be put?"

"Please, ma'am," said Hannah, intruding just within the door of the room, a face heated by exertion, and a stout arm, bared above the elbow, "the men can't bring in any more of the things, for there ain't room, unless we take some of them upstairs into miss's sleeping chamber; are we to carry them up?"

"Inquire Miss Mortimer's pleasure," was the unsatisfactory reply; and the discomposed old lady looked stiffer and harder than ever.

"Oh! yes, yes," eagerly exclaimed Gertrude, "anywhere—anything—good Hannah; I will soon unpack the cases, and send them out of the house. Indeed, my dear madam," she added, appealingly, as the maid disappeared, "it is those unwieldy wooden boxes which create all this confusion; and when once we are rid of them you will be surprised to find how little they contain."

"I have long ceased to be surprised at anything, niece," said the still unappeased mistress of the house, "and it is at least fortunate that your huge chests will supply us with firewood for the winter."

At length, when the room of Gertrude had been converted

in appearance into a well-packed warehouse, through the civil exertions of the porters, ingress and egress were once more rendered possible, and Miss Warrington unclasped her fingers.

The orphan hailed with delight this symptom of returning composure, and found courage to allude to the future arrangement of her recovered treasures, but vainly did she suggest how admirably the piano would stand between the windows, and how charmingly the bookcase would fit into the recess beside the fire-place. Miss Warrington was resolved to consider the introduction of these elegant superfluities as a grievance, and declared that, as she detested music, and never read anything save her Bible, her rooms should not be lumbered by any such useless incumbrances.

Gertrude was silenced. She had intuitively felt from the first the utter futility of reasoning with her protectress, and the impropriety of thwarting her wishes; and accordingly, she began to consider how she might the most conveniently accommodate these two bulky luxuries in her own small apartment, resolving, at the same time, that she would conscientiously refrain from reading in her aunt's presence, or disturbing her by the sound of the instrument.

Such had been the reception of Mortimer's offering; and for some weeks Gertrude carefully abstained from intruding any of her little possessions upon the notice of her aunt. Through the agency of Hannah, who soon conceived an affection for her young mistress, as she persisted in calling her, the obnoxious packing-cases were broken up and duly stowed away for winter fuel; and as, with the exception of the piano and the book-case, all the other articles were small, she experienced less inconvenience than she had anticipated in arranging them in a manner calculated to satisfy her aunt.

The effect of their possession upon herself was most salutary. She no longer felt alone, no longer deserted. Every object by which she was now surrounded spoke directly to her heart, and drew her back again into the past. Her white-washed walls were gladdened to her eyes by the sketches of the dear old house at Westrum, which had so often fondly occupied her leisure; her toilette sparkled once more with cut glass and porcelain; and, as the sunbeams penetrated the branches of the venerable trees before her

window, and threw their chequered light upon the table, there were moments in which she almost deluded herself into the belief that she was once more *at home*. And then her books!—there, indeed, her store of happiness was inexhaustible, and they were the more endeared to her by the fact that the fly-leaf of each bore some affectionate record, and that they thus spoke to her from beyond the grave.

The honest-hearted old woman, who formed in herself the whole establishment of Miss Warrington, was astounded by the magnificence which rendered the apartment of Gertrude so dissimilar to the remainder of the house; and was never weary of examining the elegant futilities with which it was crowded, but shrewd enough to comprehend that half the annoyance of her mistress on their arrival had arisen from a jealous feeling of the contrast which they would offer to her own faded and bygone treasures, which she had for years been accustomed to regard with reverence, she carefully abstained from all mention of her admiring wonder in her presence.

Thus, for a time it would have appeared as though the stately old lady had altogether forgotten the incursion which had been made upon her premises, but it was not so. Her first apprehension had been that Gertrude might pride herself on this acquisition of luxury, by which she was rendered, in a great degree, independent of those about her; and however much she gloried in her own personal independence she could not brook that the orphan whom she had befriended should thus be enabled to dispense with her good offices.

It was, perhaps, a pardonable weakness; and it was, at all events, a very common one. She did not relent, therefore, until she had become perfectly satisfied that, far from presuming on her unexpected good fortune, her mild and gentle inmate had become only the more attentive, kind, and thoughtful, as though she felt that a tacit apology were needful for the annoyance to which she had innocently subjected her hostess.

She was revolving the subject in her mind, as she had already done several times before, on a bright summer evening, when, shut into the dingy little parlour, while all was fair and sunshiny without, Gertrude was busily engaged with her needle in the service of her aunt, and dur-

ing a pause in their monotonous dialogue, a wandering Italian boy took his stand before the house with a barrel-organ, and began to play the Barcarole in Masaniello.

As the first bars of the melody met her ear the hands of Gertrude fell powerless upon her lap, and she panted with emotion. In another moment she sprang from her chair and rushed to the window, where she stood trembling, smiling, and weeping, in a breath.

"Well, well," said the old lady, with a grim smile, which was the most engaging expression of which her countenance was susceptible, "there is no great harm done if he does see you; for one of these people does not come to Bletchley for twelve months together, so that we may afford to give him a few pence."

The sound ceased, the musician was remunerated, and the spell was broken. The dingy parlour appeared more dull than ever, and the monotonous needlework more wearisome; but, meanwhile, the grim smile still rested on the features of the old lady.

"You seem uncommonly fond of music, Gertrude," she commenced, delighted at the opening afforded by the appearance of the Savoyard, "and yet I have never once heard you touch your piano since it came into the house."

Gertrude looked up cheerfully, although the tears were still glistening in her eyes, as she replied, "I feared to disturb you, my dear madam."

"Nonsense, nonsense, child," said her companion, "you see even that hurdy-gurdy, or whatever it was, did not disturb me; but perhaps you have not room to play in your own chamber. Send for Jones, and let your instrument be brought down stairs. It strikes me that it would stand very well between the windows."

"Oh, how kind you are!" exclaimed the delighted girl, earnestly.

"And while he is here," pursued the old lady, inwardly moved by this unstudied emotion, "he may as well disencumber you of your book-case; your room is too small to accommodate so large a piece of furniture."

"Oh, how happy you make me!" again ejaculated the excited listener, "and my work-frame, my dear aunt, and my painting-table—will you admit them all?"

"As you will—as you will," was the reply, "but charge

Jones to be careful of the walls as he comes down stairs. Nothing tears a house to pieces like moving furniture, and I cannot afford to new paper the passage for the next five years."

Two months after this conversation it would have been difficult for any one to have recognised Miss Warrington's hitherto dingy little parlour. By imperceptible degrees a score of elegant trilles were successively introduced; even a vase of flowers were permitted to stand upon the polished table without comment; for the quick eye of the old lady immediately detected that the careful Gertrude had placed it upon a minute mat of her own working. Ere long the dull-looking walls were relieved by some admirably executed water-coloured drawings from a well-stored portfolio; and the village carpenter, after a few hints from the fair artist, succeeded in producing some creditably-made frames, which were neatly covered with morocco paper by the same skilful fingers; the dark curtains which fell in gloomy masses like the folds of a pall were next discarded, and gossamer draperies of spotless muslin supplied their place.

An air of elegance and ease had succeeded to the squalor and desolation which had formerly been the characteristics of the house; and all had been done so quietly, so simply, and so unostentatiously, that even the rigid and independent Miss Warrington almost forgot that she was indebted to another for the increase of comfort about her.

Gradually, also, Gertrude emancipated herself from the excessive thralldom which had confined her entirely to the premises of her aunt; and, in her plain mourning-dress, and closely veiled, ventured to ramble about the immediate neighbourhood of the village.

We have already described the approach to Bletchley; but, cheerful and picturesque as it was, Gertrude soon discovered that the village possessed still greater beauties than those with which she had already made acquaintance, when, turning her back in the direction of the high road by which she had travelled, she wound round the base of the grassy height crowned by the modest church, and found herself surrounded by the original hamlet, upon whose skirt the dull and straggling street, of which she was now an inhabitant, had grown up as its population had increased.

The whole landscape was essentially English in its cha-

racter. It did not boast one grand or striking feature; there was neither rock nor torrent, dense forest nor foaming cataract to be seen on any side, but all was calm, rich, and almost holy in its beautiful tranquillity. In the distance a chain of undulating hills, clothed with beeches, shut in the prospect; and, as she stood and gazed with all the joy of a liberated captive and all the enthusiasm of an artist upon the scene before her, the declining sun poured a flood of glory upon the quivering leaves, which glittered like jewels in the light.

But the charm of Bletchley was the "Great House," a vast and imposing mansion, which looked down upon the hamlet from a slight acclivity. A splendid specimen of the solid architectural taste of the times of the eighth Henry, it spread its lordly terraces and extended its hanging woods across the whole brow of the ascent until they were parted only by a low and ancient wall from the graveyard attached to the little church already named.

The whole scene was calm and beautiful; and as Gertrude at length reluctantly turned away in order to return to her unpicturesque home, she heaved an unconscious sigh, for the time-touched and stately mansion, with its venerable woods, had brought back to her a thousand memories of Westrum, and the other dear old house which had cradled her youth. It struck her, too, as strange that in that dearth of subjects on which to converse together, Miss Warrington should never have mentioned the near neighbourhood of such a residence as this: and the rather as the whole appearance of the place evidenced its habitation. Gentlewoman as she was by birth, even although crippled in fortune, she was decidedly eligible as an acquaintance at the Manor-house, and Gertrude, in her moral solitude, could not forbear a wish that this resource had been open to her.

Again and again her thoughts reverted to that noble mansion and its embowering woods, and the modest tea-equipage was no sooner removed in the evening, than she resolved to question her aunt as to its inhabitants.

"Oh! they are rich people, very rich people," replied the old lady, quietly, "and far too grand to visit any one in Bletchley. The crimson-curtained pew, which you must have noticed opposite the pulpit, belongs to them."

"Then they are absent," remarked Gertrude; "for it has remained empty every Sunday since I arrived here. Several times I have determined to inquire the name of its owners, but it has always, until now, escaped my memory."

"Their name is Armstrong; and Hannah tells me that they returned home two days ago after an absence of three months. Here or there, however, it signifies little, for they are seen only at church."

"Are they, then, so very haughty?"

"Yes—no—I really cannot tell how to answer the question. They are free enough with the poor, and let no one want in the village if they know it; but their house is always full of company, and they are for ever driving or riding about the country; but, as they prefer the upper road when they go to the post town, they never pass this way."

Gertrude sighed. She could not but feel that it *was* mortifying to know that there was refined society within her reach even here, and yet that she was shut out from all hope of participating in its enjoyment. A moment's reflection, however, sufficed to restore her to a more healthy frame of mind: she remembered that her circumstances were changed and that she could no longer associate with the rich and the happy upon equal terms; and a flush rose to her cheek as she felt how little fitted she was, either by habit or association, to endure the mortification of any other species of companionship.

The subject was consequently dropped, for it was one in which the old lady evidently took not the slightest interest, and upon which Gertrude had as little inclination to dwell.

And so three days more passed on in the same wearisome routine as usual, and it was with delight that the orphan, on the morning of the fourth, hailed the return of the Sabbath. Sunday was to her, indeed, a day of rest and happiness; the holy services in the rustic church, the calm and impressive manner and the simple eloquence of the venerable pastor, the only guest who ever passed the threshold of her aunt, and for whom she had already learnt to feel a reverence and regard, which he repaid in fatherly and affectionate kindness; the respect-

ful and quiet demeanour of the simple congregation, and that holy calm which ever pervades the country on a Sabbath-day, all conspired to render it a festival to the heart of the orphan girl. Her plain mourning toilette was soon made; the solitary bell of the low church rang out over hill and valley; and, with her aunt leaning upon her arm, she once more advanced to the narrow pew of which she was a constant occupant.

The infirmities of age rendered Miss Warrington a slow walker, and the service had just commenced when they entered. For a considerable time Gertrude did not raise her head; and when she at length did so she threw back her veil, and remained looking earnestly towards the clergyman, totally absorbed by the pious offices in which she was engaged. It was not until the sermon was nearly concluded that she chanced to glance in the direction of the curtained pew of the Armstrongs, and she almost started as she perceived that she was an object of observation to more than one of its occupants. She instantly withdrew her eyes, but even in that momentary glance she had remarked that it was tenanted by four individuals: an elderly gentleman, elaborately powdered; a portly dame of about the same age, and two younger ladies, apparently their daughters. She perceived, moreover, that, with the exception of those of the matron, who was evidently absorbed by the rector's discourse, the eyes of all its occupants were in their turn directed towards herself.

The fact was, however, a very simple one, as she was, in all probability, the sole stranger at that moment in the sacred edifice; and the only effect produced upon her by the conviction that she had been an object of remark was her care to avoid all further glances in the direction of the Squire's pew.

Ere long the service drew to a close, and, once more supporting her aged relative, Gertrude left the church just in time to see the inhabitants of the Manor-house enter their plain but well-appointed chariot, and disappear.

"There go the Armstrongs," said the old lady, as she drew her large cloak more closely round her, and leant heavily upon the arm of her young companion, while they threaded their way among the graves. "All the petty

gentry of Bletchley will now be once more busy with the doings of the Great House, and all the poor secure of help for the next three months. Our good rector always looks cheerful when they are in their places, for they lighten his duties by their kindness to the sick ; and so do the school-children, for they are sure of not being overlooked in some way or another."

"Could they have a better or a holier welcome home?" exclaimed Gertrude, as a tear swelled in her gentle eye.

"I don't know," was the matter-of-fact reply ; "they must do something, and I suppose their pride suffers less from charity than sociability. At all events, you know now, and have seen, all that you ever will know or see of the Armstrongs."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE Armstrongs were a good old family, and the Manor-house was worthy of its owners, although the estate was somewhat shorn of its pristine splendour. Once the lordly domain of Sir Courtenaye Armstrong, to whom belonged alike mansion, village, wood, and hill, it had in process of time passed to the grandson of his niece, who, in order to render himself legally eligible to hold the property, had, by royal patent, assumed the name and arms of the Armstrongs, although the spurs of the brave old knight were not fated to be buckled on by his descendants, who had successively shown themselves rather addicted to the sports of the field than to its perils, while the extent of the property had gradually contracted under the pressure of debts and difficulties.

Enough, however, still remained to render the manor of Bletchley one of the finest estates in the county ; and if the present owners were a shade less popular than they might have been among their immediate neighbours, that circumstance might safely be attributed to the fact that neither by station, education, nor habits were those neighbours eligible to the acquaintanceship to which some among them so eagerly aspired.

But while the petty gentry and wealthy farmers looked with some asperity and indignation upon what they considered as the undue haughtiness of the Armstrongs, the prayers of the needy were secured to them by their unremitting attention to their wants; the schools and the poorhouse were rich with their gifts, and the cottages of the labourer and the peasant gladdened by their benevolence.

The head of the family was an honest, hearty, single-minded, and somewhat eccentric man, who was in perfect good humour both with himself and his possessions, and quite satisfied to live and be merry as long as he could in this best of all possible worlds; and who, as he saw prouder and nobler neighbours gradually rise up around him, and occupy with their more modern mansions, and grace by their more high-sounding titles portions of the land which had once acknowledged only an Armstrong as its lord, remained perfectly careless as to the exact position assigned to him by county etiquette on those occasions when the said neighbours, who had obliged him by assisting in the consumption of his venison and claret, in their turn invited him to their tables, satisfied that Lord John or Sir Harry were only *parvenus* in the county after all; and that they would have given, and gladly given, no small portion of their broad acres to have felt themselves, as he did, even stronger in the past than in the present as he sat among the monuments of his ancestors, and remembered that they had been lords of the same soil for centuries.

Mrs. Armstrong was a portly and comely personage, still possessing some remains of beauty, or, rather, some trace of the prettiness which had, ere she had scarcely attained her sixteenth year, won the heart of her husband. Fine-tempered and affectionate, it was impossible not to love her, although equally impossible, at the same time, to repress an occasional smile at the little absurdities into which she was continually betrayed by an education barely *ébauchée*, and a remnant of romance which offered a strange contrast with her portly person and faded face.

The girls were well-bred, well-mannered, and well-looking; a century in advance of their parents as re-

garded knowledge of the world and social etiquette, but gentle, dutiful, and exemplary in all the relations of domestic life; while their only brother, the hope of his father and the idol of his mother, possessed not only a fine person, but one of those upright and noble natures which tend to exalt humanity.

Yielding and indulgent upon all minor points, Ernest Armstrong was firmness itself in all matters of principle and right feeling; incapable of bartering one worthy impulse against personal interest or self-aggrandisement, or of committing one disloyal action for the gratification of a selfish caprice. And yet even he was not without his faults. Who is so? He was aware of both his personal and acquired advantages, and, perhaps, prided himself a shade too much on each. He was vain, too, and was ever yearning after some vague, shapeless, and untangible vision to which he was unable to give either a local habitation or a name, but which called him with vain aspirations after he knew not what, and rendered him less satisfied than he should have been with the actual advantages of his position.

The sun was sinking, and just as its last and ruddiest beam flooded the beech-woods with which the hills were clothed, the wide and lofty iron gates that opened upon the entrance court of Bletchley House were flung back, and Ernest Armstrong galloped up to the foot of the broad flight of steps, flanked with couchant lions, which led to the door of the mansion, and sprang hurriedly from his horse. The accustomed word of comment or direction was unsaid to his smart groom as he strode into the hall, and there was a cloud upon his brow, which told that whatever had been his errand it had sped ill.

The last dinner-bell was ringing as he crossed the green, and he at once proceeded to his dressing-room and made a hasty toilette ere he joined the family party, which had already proceeded to the dining-room. On his entrance every eye was turned upon him, but the eager inquiry which had risen to the lips of his fond sisters remained unuttered as they caught a glimpse of his overshadowed countenance, and felt that, until the disappearance of the servants, they must abstain from all questioning.

Mrs. Armstrong was in her place at the head of the

table, where she sat smiling at the silver tureen which glittered before her, as she was accustomed to smile on every person or thing which was familiar to her; while "the Squire," as he loved to be called, was as jovial as his wont; and the momentary disturbance occasioned by the tardy entrance of his son once over, he resumed his soup and his subject without seeming to remark that anything had occurred to darken a brow which was generally as clear and as bright as sunshine; but at length, struck by the expression of the young man's face, he said, abruptly—

"Tell us, Ernest my boy, what has gone wrong with you."

"Everything, my dear sir," was the moody reply.

"Why! you don't mean to say that the newcomers who have invaded the neighbourhood are likely to interfere with the interests of a family which has been seated in the county for centuries?"

"And yet such is the case, sir. Of our tenants we are, of course, sure enough; and were the poor voters my mother and sisters would have secured them; but it seems that, with the yeoman and petty gentry, we are by no means so popular. You do not give sporting-dinners like Lord John, nor attend vestry-meetings like Mr. Hellingham, nor do fifty other things which would bring you into familiar contact with these worthies; and thus they have decided that neither yourself nor your son are 'fit and proper persons to represent them in Parliament.' Half-a-dozen electors to whom I made known our intention of canvassing the borough, thanked me somewhat superciliously for the honour which we desired to confer upon them, politely reminded me that, although the name and estate of the owners of Blotchley House were well known to all the county, its inhabitants were strangers in their own land; and gave me civilly to understand that they would have nothing to do with us."

"W-h-e-w!" whistled the old gentleman; "they are inclined to dictate to us our duties, are they? To draw comparisons between us and a brainless young prodigal like Lord John, who, so long as he fills his house with noisy parasites, cares little for the kind of society which he ought properly to frequent; and a mumbling old

meddler like Hellingham, who contrives to keep the parish in hot water about paltry matters which one dip into his own purse would settle amicably at once! Give it up, then, my boy—give it up at once, I say. What can it signify to either of us that we earn the privilege of being abused in the newspapers for holding our tongues when they think we ought to have spoken, or for having given our opinion when they consider that we should have remained silent.”

“Yet to be so thoroughly shelved in one’s own county is anything rather than pleasant, sir.”

“Why, hang their impudence! so it is, Ernest; and I don’t see that we are called upon to put up with it, if you feel any inclination for us to try our strength. We have no reason to shrink before the free eloquence of the hustings; we may not be popular, as you say; but we can have no dirt flung into our faces which we cannot readily wipe off. Do I owe any man a penny? Am I ashamed to look any man in the face throughout the county? Can I not answer boldly to my name in any place, and at any time? What do they mean by my being unpopular? We’ll try it, Ernest; we’ll try it.”

“I trust you will, sir, for there can be no doubt that you are the only legitimate representative of this borough.”

“Or you, my boy.”

“No, sir, not I. It will suffice my ambition to follow in your footsteps.”

The old gentleman smiled affectionately upon his son, as he replied—

“But the idea was your own, Ernest; as for me, I should have lived my life out without caring one straw who won the seat, always provided he were a staunch Tory, likely to do honour to his party.”

“You should, however, remember that you owe a duty to the county, sir; all your wealthy neighbours are mere *parvenus* on the soil, while you have only to point to the vaults of Bletchley church to establish your claim and to justify your position.”

“It shall be done, Ernest; it shall be done.”

“Then we have no time to lose, my dear sir, for I understand that two candidates are already in the field.”

"So much the better," said Mr. Armstrong heartily; "there is no honour in walking over the course; so, early to-morrow we'll commence our canvass. You, girls, must drive into town, mount your smartest bonnets, and lay in a stock of flounces and furbelows, without inquiring too narrowly as to the price, while your dear mother has only to follow up her usual benevolent avocations to serve the good cause more perhaps than we now suspect. There's Jones too, my attorney, as good and as honest a fellow as ever breathed, will help us, heart and hand, I well know, for half a dozen years ago he talked to me just as you are doing to-day, Ernest; but you were then at college, and I had no inducement to trouble myself upon the subject. Now, however, the case is altered, and I feel that I have no right to shrink from smoothing your path for the future. But who are the declared candidates?"

"Lord John Somers starts in the Whig interest, of course."

"Naturally. You seldom know a duke's son, emancipated from paternal rule, who does not show his independence by opposing his father's political principles, and establishing himself as a man of the people."

"And then—and this is the opponent who is likely to give us the most trouble: there is Sir Harry Vane, Tory to the back-bone."

"Ay, Sir Harry is staunch; it almost irks me to oppose him."

"He has, however, already shown that he, on his side, has no such scruples."

"All the better, my boy, all the better, there is the less occasion for delicacy; and if he only doses his voters with new wine, as he did his friends the last time we dined at The Chase, he will not fail to set their teeth on edge, and deliver them over, sad and squeamish, into our hands."

"Yet there are persons, my dear sir, who prefer thin port and muddy sherry to no wine at all."

"Which means—? Come, speak out, boy, you know that I hate all reservations in a family. Let me understand the drift of your remark."

"Englishmen seldom vote freely on an empty stomach, and prefer a shake of the hand to a touch of the hat."

"The last I will freely give them; but I shall hardly brook to feast the Smiths, Browns, Joneses, and Robinsons under the roof of my ancestors. If I can compromise the matter by feeding them at the Red Lion——"

"Such an arrangement must not even be contemplated," exclaimed young Armstrong eagerly; "it would swamp us at once. No people are more exacting than voters on the eve of an election; and I, moreover, confess that I was quite unprepared for such fastidiousness on your part, my dear sir."

"What! Because I am so thoroughly conscious of my true position in the county that I am careless of enforcing its rights, you imagine that I should readily play the host to a mob of semi-genteel, presuming, and underbred men, about whom I neither know, nor ought to know, anything?"

"You cannot do without them; and, moreover, the election once past, you need no longer annoy yourself or your family by continuing their acquaintance."

"Nay—hang it!" expostulated the honest-hearted old Squire; "that were indeed a version of 'the orange sucked, we throw the peel away.' Recollect, young gentleman, that the appeal which I am about to make, since you declare that it must and ought to be made, will be addressed, not to strangers, but to my neighbours—men whose forefathers remembered mine—and who would justly consider themselves aggrieved should I carry the matter off in so cool a manner as you advise."

"Well, sir, perhaps you are right; and even in that case you will be no worse off than some of the proudest and noblest of our neighbours."

"Ay, confound it!" conceded Mr. Armstrong; "when a duke's son turns liberal he plays his cards with a vengeance. I verily believe that there is not one owner of a brass-plated door in the whole borough who has not, on some occasion or other, found his legs under my Lord John's mahogany. Still, I say, that I dislike the system,

not from personal pride, as you well know, but because I *do* think, and always *shall* think, that a line should be drawn, and never overpassed upon any pretext, confining each class of society to its proper limits."

"I hope that you do not intend to sport that sentiment upon the hustings," said his son with a smile.

"Confound the hustings!" retorted the Squire, as he filled his fourth glass of port, and held it up admiringly to the light. "Have your own way, however, my boy, and arrange everything as you think best. I suppose in these reforming days all my old-world prejudices must be laid aside; only thus much I will *not* concede—you and I may make shift to be hand and glove with the male portion of the population, and no great harm can ensue; but I will have no intrusion on my wife and daughters; no Mrs. Tomkins or Miss Simkins introduced into my drawing-rooms. Neither Mrs. Armstrong nor the girls are ambitious of a seat in Parliament."

"Had Ernest included us in his universal-visiting scheme," said Eleanor laughing, "I should like to have commenced my social crusade by making the acquaintance of a sweet-looking girl in deep mourning, who sat in the next pew to the rector's last Sunday. I do not think that I ever saw a more lovely face."

"Or a more ladylike deportment," followed up Mary. "Who *can* she be? I never remarked her at Bletchley church before."

"Saunders tells me," murmured the oily voice of Mrs. Armstrong, as she looked up from her plate, where she had been playing with a piece of preserved ginger, and listening with secret dismay to the discussion between her husband and her son, "Saunders tells me that she has been here for some weeks, and that she is the niece of an old maiden lady, a sort of decayed gentlewoman, who receives no one but Dr. Simmonds, and although in straitened circumstances owns the house she lives in, and is as proud as she is poor."

"What a pity!" exclaimed young Armstrong, suddenly looking up; "had she only been an uncle instead of an aunt, she would have had a vote."

"Now, fie upon you for a recreant, Ernest!" said Mary playfully; "here are we talking of one of the

sweetest-looking creatures upon earth, and you are coldly speculating upon her maiden aunt."

"You forget that I have never seen this Bletchley beauty, and that we are on the eve of a general election."

"I will bear witness," said Mr. Armstrong, "that a prettier little sylph never sported bombazine and crape. Poor thing! Poor thing! 'tis but a sad dress for one so young, and apparently so helpless. An orphan, I have no doubt."

"If I thought so—" commenced Mrs. Armstrong, and paused.

"Well, my dear, if you thought so, what would be the consequence?" inquired the old gentleman.

"Oh, nothing wrong, you may be sure, my love," replied Mrs. Armstrong, nervously twitching the strings of her cap; "only it struck me that if she really is a gentlewoman, you might not object, although she is poor, to my showing her some civility. I have daughters of my own, and they will be orphans some day, Mr. Armstrong."

"Not yet, my dear; not yet, I hope," said the squire; "but you are quite right. If she should really prove to be a gentlewoman, I see no reason to object to your showing her a little attention, if such a prospect does not alarm the girls."

"Nonsense, papa!"

"Very well; the peril be on your own heads; but we must first make some inquiries about the young lady."

"Our good rector, mamma says, is acquainted with her aunt. He will be excellent authority," said Eleanor.

"Undeniable; so you had better question him upon the subject."

"Poor thing," murmured Mrs. Armstrong, "an orphan! I shall be sure to like her, for I am an orphan myself."

"Of some years' standing, my dear," said her husband with a smile, "and probably better reconciled to your fate than this mourning beauty. However, all I have to request is, that you will take no steps in the business

until you have consulted Dr. Simmonds. Her appearance is certainly much in her favour."

And the subject dropped. The two girls were anxious to possess a new friend, and their mother to do a kind action.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON the following day all Bletchley was in commotion. The two Armstrong carriages had traversed the village *de bout en bout*; a circumstance which had not occurred within the memory of "the oldest inhabitant;" but even this marvel ceased to be matter of astonishment, or rather, was absorbed in a wonder still more wonderful, when the barouche which contained the three ladies of the family was seen to stop at the door of Miss Warrington; and, after a brief parley between the portly footman of the Squire and the mature attendant of the maiden lady, Mrs. Armstrong and her daughters actually descended from their equipage and entered the house.

What could it mean? Never before had such an occurrence taken place at Bletchley; and, although the "professional men" of the adjoining town, who had "boxes" in and about the hamlet, had long considered themselves aggrieved, yet they had always declared themselves delighted, that the Armstrong family had never made the slightest advances towards an acquaintanceship, which, alike as neighbours and as "professional men," they considered to be justly their right.

And now, when at length the inmates of the Great House had apparently resolved to alter their tactics, how had they commenced? Not by rendering honour where honour might be said to be due, but by making their first visit to an old, impoverished, and uninfluential gentlewoman, who had herself lent a decided aggravation to the case by the fact that, although an inhabitant, and even a householder in the village for many years, she had never swerved from her original determination—not to admit a single neighbour under her roof, save the elderly and widowed rector, to whom she was furnished with a

letter of introduction, and whom she consequently considered at once as her friend and her pastor, and Mr. Pilbeam, the apothecary, on the occasion of any indisposition.

Not even the kind attention and sympathy which Mrs. Armstrong had constantly and liberally evinced towards the two invalid daughters of a former curate of Bletchley—elderly maiden ladies, the one deaf, and the other paralytic—and which had been demonstrated in a manner at once costly and delicate (although, in deference to the wishes of her husband, she had never made their acquaintance), had any effect in lessening their indignation, when, as they sat behind the rusty Venetian blind of their solitary window, amusing themselves, as was their wont, by watching everything that passed in the dullest of all dull village streets, and informing themselves, in so far as their obtuse faculties permitted them so to do, of all the affairs of their neighbours, they detected the arrival of the lady of the Manor with her two blooming daughters, and their actual entrance beneath the roof of the poor and proud Miss Warrington, who, despite all their own advances, still continued as great a stranger to them as when she first took possession of the dingy old house bequeathed to her by her godmother, and became a denizen of the hamlet.

“What’s in the wind now?” exclaimed Miss Margery, as, with a shaking head, she forced aside one of the laths of the blind, in order to obtain a better view of the proceedings across the way, “what’s in the wind now?” she repeated, raising her voice to the exact and well-studied pitch which rendered it tolerably audible to her sister; “is the sky about to rain larks? And are the grantees of the Great House about to favour the gentry of Bletchley with their notice at last?”

“Better late than never,” replied Priscilla, shrewishly, “though it strikes me that it would have been more becoming had they paid their first visit to the daughters of a former pastor. However,” she added, stroking into more approved order the neckerchief of snowy muslin which was primitively crossed over her bosom, and sweeping into a capacious basket a pile of sundries, representing needlework, “we must not resent the slight, or we shall get no

more game and old wine, though our thoughts are our own, and our feelings upon the subject cannot be altered."

"If you really think they are coming here—" began Miss Margery, in her shrill tone.

"*If* I think!" interposed her more captious sister; "there can be no doubt upon the subject, to any person of sense, and their having gone first to Miss Warrington's is in all probability a mistake. You really have no proper pride, Margery, or you must at once see the utter impossibility of their visiting any one in the village and passing us over."

"Well, very likely you are right," conceded the tottering woman so vehemently addressed; "I am sure I do not wish to contradict you, and I was only about to suggest that we had better defer our dinner until after their departure."

"There is some sense in that, at all events," said the conciliated Priscilla, "and, as the parlour is tolerably tidy, we have nothing to do but to watch for them."

"Ah! Thompson, how are you?" exclaimed the fussy little apothecary, as he extended his hand to shake that of a portly ex-stockbroker, who, having been nearly "cleared out" on 'Change, had retired to Bletchley with his wife and daughter, to exist as they best might upon the dregs of what was once a snug little fortune. "Gay doings this morning in the village, eh? The Armstrong carriage, I see, at the door of my patient, Miss Warrington—something new, eh? What can be the meaning of it?"

"Pshaw!" muttered the ex-stock-broker, shrugging his broad shoulders, "The ladies are canvassing, that's all."

"Oh! they are, eh? To be sure they are! How dull I was not to understand the manœuvre. But I must just slip back and warn Mrs. Pilbeam that she will soon have company; for I have a vote for the borough."

"Oh! you have, have you?" was the surly reply. "Then I won't detain you, or Mrs. Pilbeam may not have time to change her cap before the enemy are upon her; and you can't do less than vote for old Armstrong, you know, when the ladies become personal friends. You must pocket your principles, Pilbeam, or you may chance to damage your

practice;" and with this parting courtesy Mr. Thompson moved on.

"Surly old brute!" muttered the dapper little apothecary, as he hastily retrod his steps towards home, "and a constitution like a horse; the man's an eyesore to me."

Little good-natured Mrs. Armstrong, or her daughters, suspected the commotion which their advent had created in Betchley; little did they imagine that their visit to the orphan had deferred a dinner, or prompted an impertinence. And yet so it was; and had I, Asmodeus-like, introduced my readers into the secrets of every family in the village, I could have convinced them that the "sensation," as the French designate an excitement of this description, was universal.

Happily ignorant of the fact, however, the three ladies entered the neat and cheerful little parlour in which Gertrude and her aunt were seated, with a single-hearted desire alike to please and to be pleased; nor did they, in that humble habitation, encounter anything which jarred upon their refinement, or prompted them to regret the kindly feeling by which they had been led to visit it.

Miss Warrington, unaccustomed as she had been for years to receive guests beneath her roof, had nevertheless never forgotten that she was entitled by her birth to find herself in the most unexceptionable society, and to hold her place even among the most fastidious on the question of family and breeding; nor was the quiet and somewhat stern dignity of her deportment lessened by a slight shade of displeasure at the fact that the ladies of the Manor-house had thus forced themselves upon her acquaintance, despite her declaration that she would hold communication with no one in the parish save the rector; and that the politeness now tendered had, moreover, been tardy in its demonstration.

Erect, stately, and unbending, there was no shadow of obsequiousness in the welcome which she uttered to her unexpected guests. Had they been the acquaintance of years she could not have exhibited greater ease or self-possession; and while the whole frame of Gertrude quivered with pleasure, her aunt remained as perfectly unmoved as

though she rather permitted than exulted in the compliment which was now paid to her.

The unassuming manner of Mrs. Armstrong, and the honesty of her nature, were well calculated to remove even the slight feeling of annoyance which the maiden lady had originally been disposed to indulge; and thus, as she listened to the kindly-intentioned but not very profound discourse of her visitor, the fingers of Miss Warrington gradually relaxed their convulsive clasp, her mouth resumed its natural proportions, and even her figure began to lose somewhat of its rectangular rigidity; and, meanwhile, the three younger ladies were already engaged in cheerful and unembarrassed conversation upon the thousand and one subjects which young ladies love.

"I assure you, my dear Miss Warrington," prattled on the goodnatured lady of the Manor, "that I am delighted to have a neighbour at last. It has not been my fault that I have been so long without one; but Mr. Armstrong is not fond of country neighbours, and it is my duty, you know, to consult his pleasure in everything."

"In that case, however, madam—" began her listener, with a sudden resumption of dignity, and claspings of the fingers.

"Oh, I know what you are going to say," laughed the light-hearted matron: "that, in such a case I had better not have come here now; but I assure you that, as regarded yourself, Mr. Armstrong had no objection, none in the world, quite the contrary. I am so glad to know you, and he will be so glad to know you; and the girls will be so glad to know each other; that it is only a pity we did not make out our acquaintance before."

"Let us understand each other, my dear madam," said Miss Warrington, so soon as the volubility of her companion enabled her to profit by a pause; "I am much flattered by the offer of a friendship totally unexpected and unsought on my part; and I beg you to believe that whenever you feel it pleasant to exchange the luxury of your own home for the modest obscurity of mine, I shall always be honoured by your presence; but I never leave my own house, I have not done so for years; never indeed, since I was left an orphan and my own mistress."

"How very singular!" said Mrs. Armstrong, with a smile, which revealed her still beautiful teeth; "we are only

five in number at this moment, and three of us are orphans; for Miss Mortimer, I apprehend," she added, sinking her voice to a whisper, "is also motherless."

"And fatherless," followed up her interlocutor, in an accent of deep feeling, which could scarcely have been expected from one so rigid, and apparently so passionless. "Nay, I may almost add, friendless; for my poor Gertrude has no other protector than myself; and, at my age, I cannot long expect to be spared to her."

"You are quite wrong, my dear lady, quite wrong," eagerly replied the kind-hearted Mrs. Armstrong; "she has a warm and a sincere friend in Dr. Simmonds. He speaks of her in raptures. And I am certain that when we know more of each other we shall all be her friends. Only see how Mary and Eleanor are getting on! Now, who would believe that they had never spoken to each other an hour ago! But, to be sure, our good rector had already made them acquainted with your charming niece; so I dare say they felt themselves at home with her at once."

Still a shadow darkened the faded brow of Miss Warrington. It would have been easy for a spectator to decide that, in her opinion, the young ladies were "getting on" too fast. They had turned over all Gertrude's portfolios, had ransacked all her loose music, had unfolded her tapestry, and at last appeared inclined to try the tone of her instrument.

Nor was this closing suspicion an erroneous one; for in another moment Miss Armstrong was seated at the piano, and enabling even the modest orphan to feel that, brilliant and showy as was the execution to which she listened, she could fear no rivalry in that particular accomplishment; in which, thanks to the finished science of Sybil, she was so thorough a proficient, that she had even occasionally glanced at the possibility that, should she ever be reduced to the necessity of eking out her slender income by her own exertions, she might safely depend upon her knowledge of music for a livelihood.

"I have already spoken of myself, Mrs. Armstrong," said the proud maiden lady at length, after an evident struggle with her feelings, and under cover of the noise produced by the nimble fingers of the young musician, "and I am now anxious to speak to you of my niece. I

am quite sure that you mean nothing but kindness to both of us; but that kindness may work a vast deal of evil to Gertrude. She is a good girl, a very good girl; she has made me happier than I ever expected again to be in this life; but I know that she is herself unhappy; I know that she must be so under my roof. She has been reared in luxury, and she is poor. I had hoped, and I still hope, to reconcile her by degrees to the great change which has taken place. She has good sense, and good feelings, and she will gradually reconcile herself to her fate, if she is left to struggle against it in obscurity; but I cannot answer for the effect which may be produced upon her mind by constant association with companions so differently circumstanced as your daughters. I fear that she will begin to repine, to fret, to grieve once more over all that she has lost; in short, I tell you frankly, that I see nothing but danger and sorrow in the prospect of a friendship with your family."

"Then you do not like us?" asked her visitor, with another sunny smile, which showed how easily and trustfully she anticipated the reply of her companion.

"My only fear," said Miss Warrington, laying her thin hand upon that of her visitor, "is, that we, and above all, that she, may like you too much."

"Thank you! thank you!" laughed Mrs. Armstrong, "all is then as it should be; have no care for the future. As to your pretty niece, she reminds me of the young lady in the song—

‘ Friends in all the aged she’ll meet,
And lovers in the young !’

and, moreover, I do not despair of making you yourself less unsociable than you threaten to be."

"I can exercise no control over my niece in such a case," persisted Miss Warrington, as if unconscious of the closing phrase of her companion; "yet, if I can induce her to listen to me, I honestly confess that I shall endeavour to warn her against the perils of an unequal friendship. Gertrude has at once much to learn, and much to unlearn; and, as her future life must be passed in obscurity, the sooner she masters her lesson the happier for herself."

"My *dear* lady!" exclaimed the eager matron, "how

prosily you talk! Just as if it were possible to foretel the fate of a pretty girl. Who knows but she may make a conquest under our roof? All the world are not seeking for money; and where could any man find a sweeter creature? Why, as I look round your snug little parlour, I see a thousand proofs of care and elegance, such as are frequently wanting in a larger establishment; and you talk of her having a great deal to learn. But we have really been unreasonable in our visit—we have stayed here an age—and you will be quite tired of us. Mary! Eleanor! Come, my dears, it is time for you to take leave of your new friend, or Miss Warrington will have reason to suspect that we have an idea of claiming possession of her for the day.”

The two girls sprang from their seats, and each possessed herself of the hand of Gertrude.

“Good bye, then, my dear Miss Mortimer, for the present; but we shall hope to see you very soon and very often.”

The orphan smiled amid her happy tears.

“And I want to show you to Mr. Armstrong, my dear,” followed up the mother; “so you must not disappoint us. What say you to dining with us to-morrow? Now, don’t tell me that you are engaged, for I will not believe a word of it.”

“Indeed, madam,” replied my heroine—for, radiant as Sybil may appear to many, Gertrude *is* my heroine—“I had no intention of volunteering so wild a fable. An engagement, since my arrival at Bletchley, has hitherto appeared to me as unattainable as a meteor; but I am dependent upon the will of my aunt, and must first obtain her sanction, before I gratefully accept so delightful a proposition.”

For a moment Miss Warrington resumed her most rigid perpendicular, and looked the very condensation of a thousand refusals. She was human; and it was impossible quite to forget that she had been an inhabitant of the village for more than twenty years, and that this was the first occasion upon which she had been honoured by the countenance of the owners of the Great House—a favour for which she was, moreover, shrewd enough to perceive that she was even now indebted to their admiration of her young relative. But in the next instant her pride came to

her aid ; and, resolved not to allow them to perceive and to despise her egotism, she again unbent, and deferred the question to her niece, declaring that she had not the slightest desire to control her wishes.

"Then all is arranged, my dear Miss Mortimer," said the good-natured Mrs. Armstrong, giving a hearty shake to the hand which she had already taken in the full confidence of success ; "and as you may find it pleasant to become better acquainted with your new friends before you are introduced to the rest of the family, the carriage shall be here for you at five o'clock. Nay, not a word of objection, my dear Miss Warrington ; you know that our little village, pretty and snug as it is, does not boast even a fly, and, therefore, you must let me have my way."

Resolved to victimise her own feelings even to the end, and disarmed by the cordiality of her visitor, the maiden lady forbore all further utterance of her objections ; and after a few more parting compliments, the Armstrong barouche drove from the door.

"Why, it can't be possible !" exclaimed the shrill voice of Miss Margery Bayliss as the long-tortured lath of the Venetian-blind sprang back to its place ; "they are not coming here, after all !"

"They may please themselves," was the angry retort of Priscilla ; "*we* want no patronage ; *we* are gentlewomen born, and need not condescend to anybody. I dare say the mutton is boiled to rags."

"Really, Mr. Pilbeam, you are a great deal too bad !" said his pretty but peevish helpmate ; "there go the Armstrongs actually past the very door, and it is quite clear that they never meant to come here at all ; and now I may go and undress again, and put away your best coat that you have been rubbing to pieces against the back of your chair for the last two hours. You are always trying to give me as much trouble as you can ; thinking, I suppose, that, with five children, and helping you to make up your medicines, I have not enough to do."

"It is not my fault, my dear. You know as well as I do that I have a vote."

But he argued in vain ; for the irate beauty had already left the room in high displeasure.

And there was also another who followed them with her

eyes, as the carriage rapidly disappeared, and that other was Gertrude. Stationed behind the muslin drapery of the window, with a beating heart and a glowing cheek, when she could no longer hear "the wheels of their chariot," she sighed, as though they bore her new-found happiness away with them. Again the past had come back upon her; again she felt that even for her there might yet be some sympathy in store: and then she slowly turned away from the casement, and her eye fell upon the upright figure of her aunt.

"When you are quite at leisure, Gertrude," were the first words which fell upon her ear, "be good enough to gather together all those ends of worsted. If Hannah attempts to sweep them up, I shall have my carpet scraped threadbare."

She was obeyed. The heart-chilled orphan quietly dropped upon her knee, and picked up, one by one, the bits of German wool which Miss Armstrong had scattered upon the floor. Tears rose unbidden to her eyes; the illusion had vanished, and the cold, bare, shivering reality was once more before her. The unexpected deportment of her aunt during the visit of their unlooked-for guests had surprised and delighted her by its quiet dignity, and she had, for a time, forgotten that it was not the ordinary mood and manner of her aged relative, but merely a reflection of former years and of former habits, which she would inevitably lay aside so soon as its assumption became needless. Still, it had unconsciously, even to herself, increased her respect and veneration for the withered and desolate woman to whom she was indebted for a home; and when she had risen from her knee, and carefully deposited the offending shreds in the litter-basket which stood beside her work-table, she approached her affectionately, and said in a subdued voice—

"You are not displeased, I trust, my dear madam, that I have accepted the invitation of Mrs. Armstrong?"

The old lady coughed slightly, and clasped her hands tightly together, ere she replied, "Displeased! oh, no: I have no right, no wish, to feel displeased; but I would much rather that it had not been given. Visiting is expensive amusement, Gertrude; very expensive amusement; and you cannot afford to visit. However, you know best.

But I confess that I should not, under such circumstances, like to squander upon an evening's pleasure as much as would support me for a week at home."

"Nor would I do so, my dear aunt," was the meek reply; "for my conscience would upbraid me, bitterly upbraid me, were I guilty of so great a folly."

"And are you ready to suffer the mortification of exhibiting your rusty mourning among the gay dresses of your new friends? Are you brave enough to be pointed at as the poor orphan that Mrs. Armstrong and her daughters had taken under their protection?"

"No, madam," said Gertrude proudly; "I can boast of no such courage; nor am I, as I trust, called upon to make so great a sacrifice of right and honest feeling. Had I ever dared to confide to you the amount of generosity exhibited towards me by my too liberal cousin, you would be aware how little I have cause to shrink from any contact, even with the elegant and wealthy family with which I shall so soon be brought into collision; while the second, and far more bitter mortification to which you allude, can never overtake me while I am the inmate of your house, and the daughter of your adoption."

Even Miss Warrington was moved, and her thin lips quivered for an instant; nor was it until she had recovered from this unwonted emotion that she resumed—

"My house and my adoption are, however, very small matters in the eyes of the wealthy, Gertrude; but that signifies little; I only fear lest they should soon become so in your own."

As she ceased speaking the orphan was on her knees before her, her mild eyes swimming in tears, and her lips fastened upon the withered hands which were clasped upon the old lady's knee.

"My only protectress; and, with one far-off exception, my only friend," she murmured; "have you indeed so poor an opinion of the heart, so little confidence in the gratitude, of the forsaken and abandoned being to whom, unknown as she was, you so frankly and cordially offered alike a home and a refuge from the world which had cast her off?"

"No, no, Gertrude, you mistake me," replied Miss Warrington, as at length fairly overcome, she bent down, and

pressed her lips upon the pale brow of the earnest girl. "It is not because I doubt, but because I have learned to love you, and am jealous of your affection, that I spoke thus. Dry your tears, and forget what has passed. I believe I now know you thoroughly."

"And for ever," said Gertrude solemnly; "and in order to prove to you that you do me no more than justice, I will at once renounce this new acquaintance which has excited your apprehensions. Half-a-dozen lines to Mrs. Armstrong will suffice, and I will write them now—this moment."

"I no longer apprehend anything, my dear; and I strictly forbid the sacrifice," replied the old lady. "You say that you can visit these people without expense, and without becoming weary of my poverty, and therefore so let it be, Gertrude. You are young; and Heaven knows that the life which you have hitherto led at Bletchley has been dull enough; this is your only prospect of a little change, and you shall not throw the chance from you. Bless me!" she continued, looking at her watch, "it is close upon four o'clock, and we have not yet dined! Wipe your eyes, my dear, and ring the bell for Hannah."

CHAPTER XXV.

It would be difficult to describe the feeling of triumph and exultation experienced by Miss Delamere when she became fully assured of the success of her unworthy and unwomanly act of duplicity. After so long a period of suspense; after so unwearied an exertion of all her powers of fascination and address, she was at length, at the very moment in which she had begun to despair of ever accomplishing her object, about to see all her hopes realized, and all her aspirations fulfilled. She had no time, or even inclination, to congratulate herself upon the fact that she owed her triumph to the fine sense of honour, and upright principle of the man who was to become her husband. She felt only that she had not striven in vain; that she had not suffered any obstacle to deter, or to impede her in

her pursuit ; that now, at least, she had sown the seed of policy in good ground ; and that her resolute perseverance had overcome all impediments, and would produce a rich harvest in the future.

But, amid her exultation, there was nevertheless one harrowing recollection. Sybil still remembered that she was not yet the wife of Mortimer ; that she was not yet *safe* ; that, until their hands had met at the altar, a thousand unforeseen and inexplicable chances might, despite all her precaution, overthrow the brilliant edifice of her hopes ; and that even the delicate and fastidious sense of honour to which her lover had sacrificed all his doubts, all his misgivings, all the entreaties of his mother, and all the quasi-claims of his cousin, might, should it once more be called prematurely into action, prove the most dangerous and insuperable bar to their union.

Who that looked upon that beautiful and radiant woman, as she sat with her cheek pillowed upon her small white hand, and her large eyes bent down, and veiled by their long dark lashes ; to all appearance absorbed in a tranquil and tender reverie—who could have suspected the deep and concentrated passion which even, at that very instant, was labouring in her bosom ? But as the grove and the garden flourish in rich luxuriance, and garland with their perfumed greenery the base of Etna, while the lava-flood boils and burns within its crater, so did the gorgeous loveliness of Sybil Delamere veil the deformity of her moral nature.

And yet it had not been always thus. Only a few short years before, and she had been beautiful in mind as well as in form ; but now the hot iron of the world and the world's vices had seared her heart, and had made her what she was.

Some such reflection as this floated across the mind of Sybil as she at length looked up ; and her proud lip wore an expression of bitter self-reliance which betrayed the working of her secret spirit. She had forgotten, she knew not for how great a length of time, that she was not alone ; and now, as she glanced towards the *fautail* of her mother, she saw Mrs. Delamere with the usual novel in her hand, but with her eyes fixed upon the ceiling, and evidently as completely absorbed in thought as she herself had lately been.

"You must wear a gayer aspect than you now display at my approaching marriage, my dear madam," she said, startling her companion by the suddenness of her address.

"I thought that all was at an end," was the faint reply; "I confess that I had lost all hope. However, you know best, Sybil."

"All would, indeed, have been at an end had your conjecture been a correct one," said Miss Delamere, forcing a laugh; "but surely you should have had more faith in my—what shall I call it?—my fate, my star, or, if the plain term will not shock you, my management."

Mrs. Delamere sighed.

"'One swallow,' say the proverb-mongers," pursued the younger lady, "'does not make a summer;' 'nor, believe me, does one failure make a defeat. I was yet young enough to strive, and I have striven; I vowed to succeed, and I have succeeded. I am loved, mother—loved as I have never before been.'"

"And you, Sybil, what of yourself?"

"Of me!" echoed her daughter, with a second ringing laugh, which sounded hollow and unnatural; "I made no vow to feel as well as act. I had much to revenge, much to repair; I shall soon have done both; but I have played only with my head; my heart was no party to the game."

"Can you always silence it? If not——"

"If not, I can stifle its rebellion; the task will be no new one."

"And have you told him *all*?"

Miss Delamere started in her turn.

"Do you ask me if I am mad? If I have poisoned my own draught and fired my own roof-tree? Do you not know that we are almost penniless, and that Mortimer is our last hope?"

Tears, large and silent, coursed each other down the pale cheeks of her listener.

"No," pursued Miss Delamere, in an accent so resolute that it was almost harsh, "I have *not* told him all, or a few months hence we should have been beggars. Nay, do not look so scared; I have overcome more serious difficulties than this, and I have no inclination to shrink before my last trial. He is too sensitive, too

tenacious of the world's opinion, to be trusted with a secret like mine—which he shall never know or learn until the knowledge must be borne."

"And yet, Sybil—"

"I am aware of all that you would urge," pursued Miss Delamere, with undisguised impatience, "but, in my case, such scruples could only be misplaced. I have read Mortimer to his heart's core, and I have not now to learn where he would fail. Fear nothing for the future; once his wife, I shall be able to mould him to my will—he is insufficient to himself—but this is a fact which no man will concede, even to his own reason."

"Surely," murmured Mrs. Delamere, with a slight shudder, "these are dangerous sentiments for one about to become a wife!"

Sybil smiled bitterly.

"Tell me," she asked, "am I in a position to volunteer the revelation you seek to them to consider fitting?"

Mrs. Delamere was silent.

"Let me but retain my secret," continued Sybil, evidently rather communing with herself than addressing her companion, "and Frederic Mortimer shall not long remain the inert and vacillating being he has hitherto shown himself. There are some natures—and such is his—which cannot exist without extraneous support. This has so far been his career: his aspirations are noble, but they evaporate in words; his strength exists only in his egotism; he is like one of those incongruous pictures which we sometimes look upon without well knowing whether to sigh or to sneer; a grand outline marred by the minor touches. Had he not been a weak man he might have been a great one."

For a few moments she was silent; and it was with a smile of haughty bitterness that she at length rose from her seat, and resumed:—

"I have already suffered enough—more than enough; I will be no willing victim a second time. Yes," she added, with flashing eyes and clenched hands, as she paced the apartment passionately, "I have lived to listen to words which told me but too plainly the height from which I had fallen—to find myself considered merely as a coveted toy where I had once been an idol—to see my—"

self compelled to repay insult only by a smile—and shall I not be revenged for this? shall I tamely brook the degradation from which I may free myself by my own efforts? Little do they understand the nature of Sybil Delamere who believe it possible. As the wife of Frederic Mortimer I may defy even *him*; and I will defy him, ay, to the very death!”

“Sybil, my dear Sybil, what mean you?”

“You would know my meaning? Listen, then. Recal the past—live over again for an instant the last few years—remember how *he* loved me—how *he* pursued me—how *he* flung everything at my feet, and asked me only to stoop and gather up the offering. You cannot have forgotten all this; for not only every memory, but every fact of our present existence is linked with those days. And now learn that it was to renew his suit that he was lately here——”

Mrs. Delamere leant forward in her seat with eager eyes and parted lips.

“Yes,” continued Sybil, in a hoarse whisper, as she paused before her mother, “yes, he sought me once again; but not as formerly—not with sighs, and protestations, and entreaties—but boldly, lightly, and unblushingly, with the eye of a conqueror and the lip of a libertine.”

What more she might have added is uncertain, for, as the last words escaped her quivering lips, Mrs. Delamere fell back insensible upon her cushions.

For a few moments Sybil remained looking upon her unhappy mother without making one effort to restore her to consciousness, although the flush faded from her cheek and her clenched fingers relaxed. The storm of passion which had shook her spirits to the very centre had, for a time, crushed even her powerful energies, and rendered her reckless of everything around her. Ere long, however, she recovered her composure, and, without summoning other assistance, at length succeeded in restoring the scattered senses of the wretched Mrs. Delamere, which she had no sooner effected, than she asked bitterly—

“And now, madam, have I not silenced all your scruples, and satisfied all your objections? Would you

still ask me to trifle with my last prospect of social redemption? Have I not sufficiently expiated the past to have some claim upon the future? And shall I not more honourably fulfil my destiny as the wife of Mortimer than as the mistress of Sir Horace Trevor?"

Mrs. Delamere swept her trembling hand across her eyes; they were hot and tearless: she had previously suffered deeply for years, but the iron which had hitherto only seared her spirit had now entered her soul. She made no reply to the harsh questionings of Sybil, nor did there need any; for, regardless of their reception, Miss Delamere had no sooner given them utterance than she turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Now *do* listen for five minutes, Ernest, while I tell you all about Miss Mortimer," said Mary Armstrong, as, with one arm about the neck of her brother, she bent over him while he ran his eye along a list of names spread on a table before him.

"I know all that you have to say," he replied, with an impatient smile. "She is very pretty, and very bashful, and blushes beautifully, and is quite delighted by the condescension of the ladies from the Great House."

Mary laughed. "You have made a wretched guess. Pretty you knew she was, for you had seen her at church; but as for the rest——"

"Richards," murmured the young man, still intent upon his task, "we are sure of him, I think; he is a tenant of our own. Richards, twenty-six."

"She is not a whit less at her ease with strangers than Eleanor or myself."

"Indeed! all the worse, perhaps, both for her and her friends.—Thompson—oh, ay, Thompson, of River Farm—doubtful, I fear; for I know that he is as obstinate as a mule, and as wrongheaded as——"

"Ernest, you are too bad. I have a great mind not to say another word."

You could not oblige me more, for you see that I am fully occupied already.—Collins—was it not Collins, Mary, who had an execution in his house last winter?”

“To be sure it was. Do you not remember that papa became security for the debt, and how grateful he has been ever since?”

“I thought so; then I may fairly calculate upon him. Collins, twenty-seven.”

“Well,” said Mary, desperately, “as I see that you are determined not to listen, I shall tell you no more about Miss Mortimer, but leave you to form your own opinions to-morrow.”

“And why to-morrow?”

“Because she dines here.”

“Dines here? Impossible!”

“Impossible as you may think it, she does dine here; and, moreover, the carriage is to be sent for her.”

“Very well, then, as in a good cause I am prepared to go great lengths, and as she is very pretty, I’ll sacrifice myself without a murmur,” replied the young man, extending his arms in a long yawn, which he terminated by drawing his sister closer to him, and pressing his lips upon her cheek; “and, to tell you the truth, Moggy, I shall not be altogether sorry to compensate myself by a little fun for this weary work—for, after all, it is weary work; and were it not that I expect Somerville down in a day or two to back me, I should almost feel inclined to give it up in disgust; but Somerville is a famous fellow, and an old hand at canvassing.”

Mary made no reply, but a vivid blush stole over her cheek and brow.

“Well, and now, as it appears that I must hear all you have to say about the little cottage-maiden,” he pursued after an instant’s silence, “pray favour me with it at once. You found her very pretty, very gentle, and very captivating, it seems.”

“We found her what we certainly did not venture to anticipate,” replied Mary, rallying from her momentary confusion, “a finished gentlewoman.”

“A Bletchley gentlewoman, of course?”

“You are too provoking, Ernest, and I shall leave you to make your own discoveries.”

"Thank you; but just now I have not time to venture upon any; so shall content myself, should the fair Sylvia prove as lovely across a dinner-table as she does at a distance, with cautioning Somerville, who has a strong dash of sentiment in his composition, not to fall in love with her. He is fond of 'love in a cottage' and 'love among the roses,' and all that sort of thing; and should he become thrall'd by her bright eyes, he will reserve all the smiles and flatteries which he has promised to diffuse liberally among the electors' wives and daughters for her especial benefit—an arrangement, Miss Moggy, which would materially affect the success of our canvass."

"And you expect him in a day or two, did you not say?" Mary ventured to inquire, as she turned aside and affected to be busily engaged in removing some withered leaves from a plant which occupied a *jardinière* near her.

"In a day or two," acquiesced her brother, with another formidable yawn; "and I heartily wish that he were here now. Do you know, Moggy, I had no idea that the Armstrongs were so unpopular about Bletchley."

"I am sure they ought not to be so," replied Mary, somewhat indignantly; "both papa and mamma are a sort of Providence to the poor: there is no distress which they do not seek to alleviate; no sorrow which they do not soothe. If I were papa, I would not even seek to stand for their stupid borough."

"Come, come, we must have no treason in the camp," laughed Ernest; "remember that you ladies are our light troops, and that we expect good service from you all; ay, even Miss ——;—what did you call your new wonder?—even she must be made useful."

"What nonsense you talk, Ernest! one would imagine that we had picked up some poor little peasant, towards whom no ceremony need be observed."

"Ceremony! why, surely you do not mean to imply that much of that frigid commodity will be required in the future acquaintanceship with which your new-fangled fancy has provided the family!" said young Armstrong, with a somewhat contemptuous smile, which so irritated Mary, that she turned on her heel and left him, declaring,

as she reached the door, that she would no longer encourage such ill-timed and misplaced impertinence.

"Why, you cannot surely be angry in earnest, my pretty Moggy?" he expostulated.

"Not angry, but sincerely pained," she said, steadily; "and I will now leave you to your more congenial employment."

"Not with a frown, at all events. Give me at least a kiss before you go."

Mary was not inexorable; she lingered for an instant; and, as her brother whispered in her ear, "To oblige you I will even promise to fall in love with your *protégée*," she could no longer retain her displeasure; but, shaking her finger at him, said, laughingly, "Always in extremes, as usual; I have an equal horror of Scylla and Charybdis; so, if you seek to please me, you will steer a middle course."

And with these words she disappeared; while young Armstrong, returning to his seat, soon lost all memory of the discussion over the important list of voters which he had been previously studying.

"Well, well, we must make the best of it now," said Mr. Armstrong, when informed by his wife of the invitation which she had given to Miss Mortimer; "but you have exceeded your commission, Charlotte. You know how carefully I have eschewed the petty gentry of the neighbourhood, and now you have saddled me with a woman from Bletchley."

"But the girls like her so much——"

"Of course they do; young folks are always delighted with a fresh face, and have no objection to a foil," said the Squire, "but I detest the principle. It is at once unfair and unhandsome."

"I'm sure, if I had thought that you would be angry——"

"I am not angry, Charlotte, but I like everything in its proper place, and this poor girl will be out of place here."

"Somehow or other," said Mrs. Armstrong, who was not fastidious in her familiar phraseology, "somehow or other, my dear, I think you'll change your mind when you know her."

"I hope I may," was the abrupt retort.
And he did so.

On the morrow, when Gertrude entered her aunt's little parlour, simply attired in a plain close dress of black crape, with a single white camelia half hidden among her luxuriant hair, even the obtuse Miss Warrington could not help thinking that she had seldom seen anything more beautiful than the gentle orphan; who, with eyes sparkling with anticipated happiness, and cheeks slightly flushed, appeared only anxious to conceal from her protectress the extent of her new-found joy.

"Why, you look like an angel, Gertrude!" she exclaimed, involuntarily.

"May I always so look in your eyes," was the meek reply; but at that moment no thought of vanity mingled with the heartfelt and innocent delight of the fair girl. It was not that she had forgotten the past; it was not that she had ceased to mourn in secret over her buried hopes; for, alas! the memory of suffering is like the poisoned bale, which, when opened and examined, spreads pestilence over all with which it comes into contact; but she was young, and she had been living for months in an ungenial and chilling atmosphere.

No wonder, then, that Gertrude looked forward with her first feeling of recovered happiness to any congenial companionship. Had she been less nobly endowed by nature, or less pure and lofty in mind, she might have recurred to the chilling inference of her aunt, that she was about to be looked upon as "the poor orphan whom Mrs. Armstrong and her daughters had taken under their protection;" but no such suspicion darkened the spirit of the orphan. She had been accustomed from her girlhood to meet the world upon equal terms; and she was unconscious that it could ever be otherwise, or that her altered fortunes might affect the feelings of others towards her. Had she, indeed, learnt this bitter lesson, it might have dimmed her eye and paled her cheek, to reflect that she was about to brave such an ordeal; but strong in her honest single-heartedness, no misgiving came to mingle with her delight; and as she alighted at the door of the Manor-house she thought only of the kindly words and smiles with which she had been bidden there.

When she reached the stately drawing-room, into which she was ushered by a venerable grey-headed servant, she found it tenanted only by Mrs. Armstrong; whose greeting, smiling and courteous as it was, was still somewhat constrained. She was trembling, poor woman! lest her lord should not like Miss Mortimer so well as she herself did, and was consequently afraid of making too much progress in their acquaintance.

But, although the conversation languished, Gertrude found ample amusement in admiring the fine oak-panelling of the spacious apartment, with its delicate carvings and grim old family portraits. To her such a room was fifty-fold more attractive than any modern saloon tricked out with the myriad costly baubles which tell no tale of the past; and her bright eye wandered hither and thither, from the steel-clad cavalier to the wigged and frowning judge; and from the prim and powdered dowager to the bland and graceful maiden, undisguised even by the mass of hair and plenitude of petticoat which half concealed her age, unconscious that her hostess was ill-at-ease, and anxious only to find herself once more in the society of the two amiable girls who had penetrated like sunbeams into her dreary home.

She was standing wrapt in admiration of a fine full-length, by Reynolds, of the late proprietor of the estate, upon which the last ruddy tints of the setting sun were lingering in a blaze of glory, when the door suddenly opened; and, as she turned with a throbbing heart to receive, as she believed, the greeting of her young friends, she found herself confronted by a slight and handsome man, whose extreme likeness to the portrait by which she had been attracted, caused her inadvertently to start; nor was she singular in her emotion, for the surprise exhibited by the intruder, as his eye met hers, was equally apparent.

In the next instant, however, he advanced; and his bow was at once respectful and courteous, as Mrs. Armstrong exclaimed, in a tone of undisguised relief, "Oh, I am so very glad that you are come, Ernest, for the girls are sadly late to-day! Miss Mortimer, my dear, Mr. Ernest Armstrong, my son."

Gertrude curtsied, and resumed her seat, while the young man, who had promised to sacrifice himself by flirt-

ing with the cottage-maiden, was evidently at some loss how to commence his undertaking. He had, indeed, previously seen her more than once, but never as he saw her then; her graceful and delicate figure, revealed in all its symmetry by the soft drapery of her transparent dress; her fair brow, crowned by a diadem of sunny hair; and her whole appearance indicating the elegance and refinement which are attainable only by the well-born and the well-bred.

One glance sufficed to show him all this, while every word she uttered only increased his admiration. The sunniness of her smile, the softened brilliancy of her speaking eyes, the varied expression of her lovely and animated countenance, and the rare and beaming charm of intellect which diffused a new beauty over what was already beautiful, together with those transient shades of melancholy which her early trials had rendered a portion of her nature; all combined to bewilder his imagination and to fascinate his feelings.

Meanwhile Mrs. Armstrong, encouraged by the evident pleasure of her son, resumed her usual composure. Where Ernest, with all his fastidiousness about women, took so little pains to conceal his admiration, she could no longer doubt that his father would be equally satisfied that her discrimination for once had not been at fault. Perhaps she might have been less satisfied with her own generalship could she have known that already, although half-an-hour had not elapsed since the introduction, her son was secretly lamenting the unlucky chance which had brought Henry Somerville, the most popular man in London, to the Manor-house, before he had secured the claim of previous acquaintanceship with the beautiful young stranger. And never would Ernest Armstrong himself have so heartily rejoiced to learn that Henry Somerville was already engrossed by a passion for his sister Mary, as he would have done could it have been whispered into his ear at that moment.

Unconscious of the effect she had produced, and wholly absorbed by the happiness of once more finding herself in congenial society, the heart of Gertrude beat calmly, and a bland smile played about her lip. The sisters, on their entrance, welcomed her with a warmth which even satisfied

Ernest; and, although the old gentleman at first met her with a cold bow, and a grave courtesy which was almost chilling, his brow soon relaxed; and as he led her to the dining-room, his eye rested upon her beaming face a moment longer than it need have done.

"Have you yet commenced your flirtation with the pretty villager?" asked Mary, maliciously, as she followed in the wake of her mother, who had taken the arm of Mr. Somerville, leaving her daughters to the escort of their brother.

She was answered only by an impatient "Pshaw!"

"Do you really not admire her?" asked Mary, anxiously.

"Do we admire the angels!" demanded her brother, in reply; "I can scarcely believe her to be human."

"My *dear* Ernest?" expostulated both the girls, somewhat alarmed, "what *can* you mean?"

"To 'fool you to the top of your bent,' what else?" said the young man, making a violent effort to restrain himself. "Do you not know that both my head and heart are now too fully occupied by votes and voters to have much attention to spare even to so pretty a girl as your village divinity?"

Reassured by this reply the sisters seated themselves at table; Mary, in quiet gladness beside the brilliant Somerville, and Eleanor near her new friend. The meal passed in unusual cheerfulness, for Mrs. Armstrong was silently congratulating herself upon the evident satisfaction of her husband, while the Squire himself, startled out of his ordinary exclusiveness by the beauty and elegance of his fair guest, and gratified by the arrival of his son's friend to share the fatigue of the approaching canvass, was full of jest and merriment.

The spirits of Gertrude rose under the influence of so genial an atmosphere; and the winning sweetness of her manner, combined with the cultivation of her mind, won upon all around her, although by no means in an equal degree; for, long before the evening came to a close, Ernest Armstrong was what is commonly called "over head and ears in love" with the beautiful orphan.

It chanced that in Gertrude Mortimer were combined all the peculiar excellences which were essential to the taste of Ernest Armstrong, who, affectionate rather than impassioned, could see no charm in a beauty devoid of

gentleness and repose, and who was a stranger to that exaggeration of sentiment and impetuosity of feeling which are as brief as they are demonstrative. His tastes, save such as led him to covet advancement and the world's plaudits, were simple and refined, and there was a depth in all his feelings which, although difficult to fathom, rendered them equally beyond the power of common events to ruffle or disturb.

To love with such a man was to love earnestly and well, and the fact that he had attained his four-and-twentieth year without even admitting to himself a preference, far less a passion, was a sufficient proof that he was not to be misled merely by an excited fancy. Accustomed to analyse and to reflect, he readily detected the false-seeming of the designing and the artificial, while he was keenly alive to all that was sincere, and great, and beautiful. Mature in mind, because alike self-governed and persevering, he could appreciate the mental and moral qualities of others, at the same time that he possessed in himself every necessary attribute to grace and gladden domestic life.

Such was the heart which Gertrude was destined unconsciously to win—poor Gertrude, who had been slighted and abandoned for a specious and worldly coquette, by one who should have known and prized her better.

Little dreaming that the happy evening which she had spent in the midst of smiles, and flowers, and music, was to form an era in the existence of one at least of the party, she consequently took leave of her friends at the Hall with a gladdened and a grateful heart, over which no single shadow fled to mar its joy, and on her homeward drive poured out her spirit in thankfulness to Him who raised for her so bright an oasis in the desert of her blighted existence, and looked with renewed cheerfulness upon a future from which she had hitherto shrunk with a feeling of desolation and anxiety.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE time, meanwhile, was passing very differently with Sybil. Like Gertrude, she had been cradled in luxury, and, like her, she had experienced a reverse; but there ended the parallel. The trials of the orphan had been totally independent of her own actions, while the brilliant Miss Delamere had recklessly rushed upon her fate. Born in the midst of affluence, she had been the child of care and affection, and happiness appeared to be her birthright. The passionate caresses of a weak and indulgent mother, and the ill-judged admiration of a short-sighted father, proud of her beauty and lavish of his praises, had early taught her the secret of her childish importance, while the uncalculating expenditure by which she was surrounded imbued her with a selfishness that, even in her girlhood, became the mainspring of all her actions.

In one respect, however, this self-adulation proved her friend; for, anxious to shine in that world which was the worshipped idol in her luxurious home, she devoted herself with the pertinacious earnestness which formed a strong feature in her character, to the various studies which were rather suggested than urged upon her. In every showy accomplishment she soon excelled; and, overwhelmed by the delighted encomiums of her exulting parents, she learnt to appreciate the increase of attraction which she thus secured, and turned eagerly to newer and more difficult attainments.

Surrounded by the costly appliances of wealth, the reputed heiress of thousands, and the belle of every ball-room—gifted alike by nature and by fortune, Sybil Delamere aspired to exalted rank, and deemed no station too lofty for her merits. In vain did suitors present themselves, to whom even her anxious and doting father could advance no plausible objection; their addresses were repulsed with scorn; and the haughty beauty at the age of five-and-twenty found herself still Miss Delamere.

It is true that she had nobles in her train, but among these some demurred to her pedigree, others to her un-

disguised coquetry, and others again to her somewhat ostentatiously displayed acquirements. She was a delightful companion in a ball-room, a charming acquaintance in a crowd, but none among them wooed her as a wife. They enshrined their idol with the most delicate flattery, but they left her upon her self-erected pedestal.

Handsome, witty, and self-possessed ; as she disgusted one set of admirers by her insolent assumption, she saw new lovers ever ready to chain themselves to the wheels of her chariot ; and at length, among the crowd of her idolaters, she numbered Sir Horace Trevor, a baronet of ancient family and large estate, who, captivated by her beauty, and the admiration of which she was everywhere the object, laid himself and his fortunes at her feet after the brief acquaintance of a month.

Assuredly such a marriage was far from realising the long-indulged visions of the spoilt beauty ; but, as he whispered his hopes into her ear during the pause of a quadrille, she suddenly remembered that her youth was ebbing from her, and that she had attained the sober age of twenty-five.

What marvel, then, that she answered by a smile ?

A few months subsequent to this engagement Sybil lost her father ; nor was it until upon his death-bed he revealed the fact, that she became aware of the hollowness of her position. She had, indeed, long been standing upon a sand-heap, which was rapidly crumbling away beneath her.

The principal of a mercantile house which had for several generations ranked as one of the most wealthy in the country, Mr. Delamere had sacrificed to ostentation and self-indulgence so large a portion of his capital, that he had found it necessary to enter into extensive and hazardous speculations in order to retrieve his fallen fortunes ; but, naturally sanguine, reckless, and indolent, he had by such means only increased his difficulties ; and now, in his last hours, when he should have put from him all thoughts of the world and the world's vanities, he found himself compelled to humble his proud spirit before the wife whom he had ruined, and the daughter whom he had deceived ; and to confess that he had for years existed upon the credit so long and so laboriously

created by his predecessors, while he was, in fact, almost a beggar.

He told his tale, and died.

With what feelings it was heard by his appalled and helpless wife it were idle to attempt, even for an instant, to describe, while upon Sybil it produced no more powerful effect than surprise. To her the idea of approaching poverty could only convey a mass of vague and undefined images; she attached no tangible meaning to the word. Her father had declared, while the large tears fell slow and cold upon his wasted cheeks, that henceforward there remained nothing to his family save the strictest necessities of existence; and Sybil, with a smile, had bidden him cease to grieve, as they should be rich enough with these.

And if the dying man, even amid his blind and doting adoration of his brilliant child, marvelled, despite himself, for a moment at the cheerful self-abnegation of one who had never hitherto displayed so holy and beautiful a forgetfulness of her own interests, the mistake was a happy one, and served to smooth his downward passage to the tomb.

Had Miss Delamere been enabled to form a more correct estimate of the essentials of life, she would still have regarded with perfect philosophy the change which had so suddenly come over her fortunes, for she remembered her engagement, and consequently felt herself free from all apprehension for the future. Sir Horace Trevor was sufficiently wealthy to render such a circumstance unimportant; and she never reflected for an instant that the ruin of her father could affect her own prospects.

Nor was her trust in her lover ill-founded. The baronet, of course, learnt, with the rest of the world, that the apparently gigantic wealth of Mr. Delamere had been a mere splendid fallacy; but he was too thoroughly subjugated by the fascinations of his affianced bride to see in such a circumstance any reason for liberating himself from his engagement; and thus, although when the affairs of the deceased merchant were wound up, amid which the personal debts of Sybil herself furnished no inconsiderable item, and that it was ascertained how very limited a sum remained for the maintenance of the widow

and her daughter, neither the vain and weak mother, or her child, considered it necessary to make the retrenchments which their altered means suggested, merely satisfying themselves with such as were enforced upon them by their mourning state, and retiring to one of the country residences of Mr. Delamere, which, by the zeal and self-devotion of some of his tried friends, had been saved from the wreck of his property, and there surrounding themselves with the luxuries and comforts to which they had been accustomed.

Under these circumstances it is scarcely necessary to explain that the capital which, prudently administered, might at least have insured to the survivors a modest existence, became rapidly diminished in amount, but still no attempt was made by either to defer the impending ruin.

Mrs. Delamere, who had, throughout her whole life, been accustomed to depend on others, abandoned the care of her future career entirely to Sybil, who, strong in her prospect of soon becoming Lady Trevor, scorned to admit the possibility of any change in their mode of life.

Thus the year of mourning passed by; and with it passed away also an important portion of the means upon which they had now to depend for their subsistence; but this consideration appeared in no degree to influence the proceedings or feelings of Miss Delamere. As the period arrived at which the widow could once more appear with propriety in the world, she took active measures to dispose of the pretty villa, which was their last home of early days; and, having succeeded in securing an eligible purchaser, completed the sale under her mother's sanction; and forthwith busied herself in appropriating the proceeds to the arrangement of a hired house in an unexceptionable part of town, whence her marriage might take place without derogation, either to her own consequence, or to that of her bridegroom.

Sir Horace Trevor was assiduous in his homage; somewhat weak, and undisguisedly vain, the loungeur of fashion, who was about to sacrifice what the *roués* of society call their freedom to the charms and fascinations of Miss Delamere, was too proud of the admiration elicited by

his affianced wife to find any time, or to feel any inclination, to censure the wanton improvidence which was necessitated by its indulgence. Perhaps he might have desired to see the accomplishments and attractions of the beautiful coquette more immediately exerted for his own gratification; but be this as it might, it is at least certain that none could have discovered such a feeling in his manner; and that, although the name of the brilliant Miss Delamere was occasionally coupled at the clubs, or on the mall, with those of more than one of his most familiar friends (and that not always with the degree of respect and caution due to a betrothed wife), he was still to be seen at her side, alike in public and in the luxurious semi-solitude of her home, as attentive, as devoted, and as absorbed as ever.

The season was nearly at an end. London began to yawn from its suburbs to its very centre. That minute portion of its denizens who insolently call themselves "the world" were hurrying either to their estates in the country, or to display their wearied glories in foreign courts; the matches which had been arranged during the turmoil of the last three months were publicly heralded in the "Post," for the edification of the vulgar, and were already engrossing the inventive faculties of milliners, and employing the technical talents of the law. It had been, as was generally allowed by the privileged, an "unusually good spring:" tradesmen were calculating their gains, and mothers smiling over their triumphs. There had been no important deaths "to plunge half a dozen noble families into mourning;" and people had nothing left to do but to rush abroad and become voluntary exiles for the remainder of the year, or to stay at home and "dullify."

Sybil, like the rest, was somewhat worn and somewhat withered by the ceaseless race of dissipation; but this was not all. Among the "fashionable departures for the continent" figured the name of Sir Horace Trevor—Trevor, the obsequious suitor and the affianced bridegroom—Trevor, the bewailed of the clubs and the mourned of the dandies—Trevor, the quasi-benedict! What could this mean?

Suffice it that he was gone, and that there was joy and

gratulation at the hearth of his venerable father. It was evident that, be the cause what it might—and the secret had been, for a wonder, marvellously kept—his marriage was at an end.

In another month Mrs. Delamere and her daughter left town, and in three more they were domesticated at The Grange.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE little French clock in the morning-room of Miss Delamere had chimed twelve, and was still ringing out the simple and pretty air of *Charmante Gabrielle*, in that clear and almost unearthly harmony which seems as if created by the movements of a fairy dancing over a peal of silver bells, but its music had evidently no charm for the ear of its brilliant mistress. Attired with a care and coquetry which betrayed her determination to enhance to the utmost the value of her personal attractions, there was, nevertheless, a cloud upon the brow of Sybil which accorded ill with the festal character of her dress. And well might it linger there, for she felt that the next few hours must decide her fate.

As yet Mortimer had not disappointed even the slightest of her anticipations. She had played her game skilfully and boldly, and the stake was almost won. But there was still a difficulty to overcome, and even she, self-sufficing as she was, shrank before it. She had yet to tell him that she was a beggar! True, she had smiled when her mother alluded to this necessity, and declared the matter unimportant; but when she compelled herself to look closely, and to remember the circumstances under which they had originally met, and the false seeming by which she had maintained her brilliant position, her heart almost failed.

For the first time in her life she felt that she had overacted her part, and voluntarily plunged into a sea of difficulties. It was, however, too late for repentance, for she could no longer conceal the real circumstances of her position. Mortimer had already spoken of the neces-

sity of summoning a professional friend for the purpose of preparing the marriage-settlements, and she was well aware that a lawyer was not to be blinded like a lover. Moreover, her pecuniary resources were almost exhausted; she had no longer an instant to lose; all the splendour and indulgence by which she had surrounded herself were about to vanish like a dream; and she bitterly felt that youth and hope would alike pass away with them. All further attempt to disguise her actual situation was impracticable; and, even fertile as she had proved herself hitherto in expedients, she was compelled to admit the fact. Nothing was left, therefore, save to avow her utter want of fortune to Mortimer, and to trust to fate and her own fascinations to accomplish a new triumph.

Upon one point alone she was decided—she must not, she dare not, tell him the truth; she knew too well that his rigid sense of right would revolt against the persevering falsehood and dishonesty of her past conduct; some fable must be invented to amuse him, and to interest his sympathies in her behalf; he must not be suffered to suspect that he had been duped.

Such were the reflections of the female Machiavel, who sat surrounded with luxury, and herself the brightest object in that sunny summer-room, awaiting the advent of her suitor; and well had she calculated her influence over his mind. "Every thing by turns, and nothing long," the very "Cynthia of the minute," she was aware that her strong hold on Mortimer was her infinite variety, which amused his imagination while it bewildered his judgment. Tears had served her well upon a former occasion, but then it was the fond and sensitive woman shrinking from the first faint breath of blame, and tears were the natural and fitting concomitants of such a grief. Now, it was her pride, not her delicacy, which was in arms. She must show him that she would rather resign even his love than her own self-respect. He must find her with a dry eye and an apparently settled purpose, however that purpose was actually destined to be shaken by his expostulations. But, confident as she was in her powers of dissimulation, she was yet terrified lest, by so utter a change in her worldly circumstances,

those expostulations should be withheld; and now, in her solitude, there was no acting in the terrible emotion which bathed her brow with chilling damps, and made her pulses throb.

A rapid step in the hall, and the hurried opening of the door of her apartment, ere long startled her into renewed energy of purpose; and, as Mortimer approached her with joy beaming in his eyes, she extended her hand, and struggled to smile a welcome.

The quick glance of affection was not, however, to be cheated by the compelled wreathing of that pale and trembling lip, and it was with great alarm that Mortimer inquired into the cause of so violent an emotion.

"Alas! Frederic," replied Miss Delamere, as she averted her face, and breathed a sigh which appeared to heave a weight of woe from her oppressed bosom, "no wonder that I am wretched when I am called upon to communicate to you that which will, in all probability, separate us for ever."

"What can you mean, Sybil?" was the anxious retort of the bewildered Mortimer; "surely your anonymous persecutor has not dared again to invade your peace? Speak, I entreat of you; and leave me now, at least, free to unmask the cowardly assassin, who is amusing his foul leisure by undermining our happiness."

Sybil shook her head, and remained silent.

"If the law can reach him ~~and~~" pursued Mortimer, indignantly.

"Fate, not malice, is our present enemy," said Miss Delamere, with a second sigh; "there is no foe to combat, no adversary to overcome. I believed that all my trials were at last over, that all my visions were about to be realised; but I deceived myself. Strong in your affection, I had forgotten that chance and change are the governing principles of this life, and I have been suddenly awakened from my delusion. While I was dreaming in fancied security of a future of peace and love, insured by your affection, destiny was at work to falsify all my previsions. I appear, and have long appeared, to live in a world of shadows; I no sooner seek to grasp them than they elude my touch. You know not—may you never know!—the trials through which I have

passed; but for this last blow I confess that I was totally unprepared!"

"Sybil, you torture me!"

"For your sake and for my own I will at once speak plainly," said Miss Delamere, while her fingers wandered, as if unconsciously, among the luxuriant hair of her listener, and parted the heavy curls from his hot and throbbing forehead. "Our contemplated union is at an end. We may be, we *must* be, still dear to each other, Frederic, but we can be no more than friends. The property of my father was placed in the hands of trustees, one of whom has absconded, carrying with him all the funds upon which my mother and myself were dependent for our support. The other was a mere cypher, from whom nothing can be recovered, nothing hoped. Like ourselves, he intrusted all to his colleague; and, like ourselves, he is also a heavy loser; but he has other resources, we have none. Utterly in his power through the confidence of my misguided father, and the faith reposed in him by his co-trustee, his evasion is our utter ruin; and all this—the blight of two lives, and the wreck of one fabric of happiness such as the world has seldom ever dreamed of—has been conveyed to me on a single page in a few formal lines of condolence and information. Of myself I dare not speak. It is only in my own heart that I am conscious of the amount of suffering which I am called upon singly to endure."

And, as she ceased, the head of Sybil sank upon the shoulder of her lover, and he felt the shudder which passed over her whole frame.

"And is this all?" asked Mortimer, as he clasped her to his heart. "Is this the mighty and insurmountable obstacle which is to sever us? Surely, Sybil, you wrong me by such a doubt, and you have never understood the nature of my love. Did you for a moment suspect that I valued you for your power of adding to my wealth, or for anything save your own dear self? How little do you yet understand a passion like mine! Learn to know me better, and to feel that I rather rejoice at this sudden reverse of fortune, which makes you more entirely my own. Are you mourning over your loss of affluence? Have I not enough for both of us? What have you

lost? Will not our home be that of your mother? and am I not rich enough to maintain you in the comfort and opulence to which you have been accustomed? Fie upon you, Sybil; you have never yet understood me. Oh, my beloved Sybil!" he added, passionately, "this calamity alone was needed to show you all the extent of my attachment; and, far from deprecating its occurrence, I welcome it as the blessed means of proving to you the sincerity of an affection which can end only with my life. Henceforward I shall remember that I won you when you were wealthy and independent, and when I could offer you no equivalent for the position which you occupied save a devoted heart. Say, dearest, is it not well worth while to lose something of the world's wealth to secure so proud a feeling?"

"But I am literally a beggar, Frederic; these empty gauds by which I am now surrounded, constitute my whole fortune, and my mother's."

"And we could have dispensed even with these, dear Sybil," replied Mortimer, as he strained her to his breast; "such love as ours is independent of the vanities of society. Now, indeed, I feel that I have a worthy stake in the world; that I am no longer a mere unit in the countless crowd of my fellow-men; but a responsible and important member of society, with others dependent upon me for support and happiness. You shall see how this conviction will operate upon my hitherto listless character; you shall learn how deeply I feel the holiness of my earthly mission; and you shall do me justice."

Was the renewed shudder which passed through the veins of Miss Delamere one of compunction, as she listened to this impassioned reply? Who shall say! She had prepared herself to exert all her powers of fascination, all her arts of coquetry; but the fervent honesty of purpose by which she had been met negatived all her plans. The victim was self-bound to the horns of the altar.

"Frederic," she at length murmured fondly, "I scarcely know how to thank you. *You*, indeed, then love me for myself. *You* are above the vicissitudes of fortune; and it is at last my happy fate to be really valued for my own sake. Oh, did you know, could you guess, how thoroughly you have, by this noble self-abnegation, redeemed all

human nature in my eyes, I think that you would not regret the sacrifice which you are making, great as it is. You know not what I have suffered since the arrival of that fatal letter. My reflections were horrible! Warned by the past, I did not dare to hope that even your affection—and believe me, when I declare that I nevertheless did justice to its sincerity—I did not dare to hope that it would withstand such an ordeal. Oh, I have indeed felt within the last few hours how short a step it may be from joy to despair; and how, while we possess the one, we should prepare ourselves against the tortures of the other!”

“My poor Sybil!”

“Yes, pity me, Frederic, pity me; for I have lived a year of torture since yesterday. But I will dwell upon this miserable subject no longer. You love me; and I have now nothing to regret, nothing to apprehend. You are my world; and although I shall give myself to you far otherwise than I hoped, I have no fear that your affection will be diminished by my misfortunes. Nay, I could almost forget the humiliation of my own pride, to thank destiny for a blow which has elevated me in my own eyes, since it has failed to lessen me in yours.”

“It is not in the power of fate to do so,” replied Mortimer earnestly; “therefore let not the hateful consideration of money occupy your thoughts for an instant. It can be no obstacle to our happiness. I can restore to you the opulence which you have lost, and maintain you in the station to which you have been accustomed. You shall have nothing to regret. In your mother I shall find a new parent, and in yourself possess all that I can covet in this life. Do not, therefore, wrong my affection by grieving over an inevitable misfortune, but rather tell me when you will give me a legal right to repair it.”

A thick and stifling sob rose to the throat of Miss Delamere. Even she, callous and selfish as she was, was nevertheless overcome for an instant, and felt abashed before the dupe whom she had made. But the pang of compunction passed as rapidly as it had risen; the game was now, indeed, in her hands, and the recompense of all her efforts within her very grasp. Her tears fell warm and fast upon the hands which clasped her own; but as their impulse remained unsuspected, this womanly gush-

ing out of sensibility only endeared her the more to the infatuated Mortimer.

"All shall be as you will," she whispered, as she passed her hands across her eyes, and then swept back the clustering curls which had half veiled her countenance. "All—for henceforth I can have no will but yours."

"And you will promise to weep no more, my best beloved?"

Sybil shook her head with a faint smile.

"Let this be your first act of wifely obedience," said Mortimer fondly; "for it is impossible to talk of the future while I see you steeped in tears. And now let us be more just to ourselves than we have hitherto been, since the world seems inclined to treat us roughly, and to leave us to be the architects of our own happiness. I give you a fortnight, Sybil; a whole fortnight, to prepare for the awful event which we have deferred too long already. Nay, no disclaimers; I feel inclined to be arbitrary, and I will not concede another day, not another hour. You see, therefore, that you have no time for regrets."

"But I have much to arrange; much to retrench."

"We will do all in good time; but for the present we must have no retrenchment, no alteration. Your mother will need to be surrounded by familiar objects, and to indulge her usual habits, during your absence. In losing you she will already have lost too much. Leave The Grange, therefore, without one change which may imply that you abandon it for ever. Would that we could also leave Mrs. Delamere in happy ignorance of what has occurred, but that is, I fear, impossible!"

"As yet," faltered Sybil, "she knows nothing; for I confess that I did not dare to acquaint her with the truth, while there existed a probability that I should yet have more and darker news to tell; nor indeed, even had I wished to do so, could I have commanded sufficient self-possession to render such a tale intelligible."

And herein, at least, Sybil was partially sincere, for Mrs. Delamere was ignorant of the new expedient contemplated by her daughter, and could not consequently have comprehended the condolences of Mortimer had he

deemed it fitting to offer them ; but as such was far from his intention, Sybil gladly saw herself freed from this last peril, and acquiesced in the suggestion that no suspicion of her heavy trial should be engendered in the mind of the unhappy lady.

Alas, for Sybil Delamere ! The child of love and prayer, how had she fallen from her high eminence ! By how many slow and almost imperceptible steps had she been advancing on her downward path ! How little do women, while venturing upon their first act of levity, anticipate the remorse and wretchedness to which they are about to subject their after-life, and in what a tissue of duplicity and untruth they are about to involve their future actions ; striving in vain, moreover, to believe that a trifling dereliction from duty and high principle cannot condemn them, even while they are compelled to feel that it indeed does so in the very mystery by which it is necessary to shroud it ; and above all, in the consciousness that they have become less pure in their own eyes !

Far, very far, had Sybil progressed in this bad pilgrimage. But the glory of loveliness still beamed about her ; and Mortimer was destined to be its victim.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN the society of the family at the Manor-house Gertrude had found a resource and a comparative happiness, for which she was deeply grateful ; and as the virtues and accomplishments of the orphan developed themselves to her new acquaintance, the intercourse between the families became more intimate ; the passion of the young heir continuing unguessed at alike by its object, and those around them.

To Gertrude herself, the future presented no vision of affection. She believed her heart to have been exhausted in the past ; and even when her thoughts rested on Mary Armstrong, and he who soon afterwards became her declared suitor, she wove no web of fancy for herself, in which she too was to be loved and won.

The ceaseless attentions of Ernest Armstrong, the more welcome perhaps that they were unobtrusive, and only to be estimated by their perseverance, solaced her pride and soothed her feelings ; but she attached to them no importance whatever, considering them as the mere kindly demonstrations of an amiable nature, intended to beguile her into a temporary forgetfulness of her desolate position. And in this spirit alone did she receive and respond to his anxious and earnest devotion ; thankful that she was no longer able to say in her solitude, as she had once said, that she had ceased to be an object of interest to any, and was destined to tread the path of life without one kindly hand to thrust aside the briars with which it was overgrown.

Such was the state of Gertrude's mind, when, as she was one morning busily engaged in giving the last touches to a masterly sketch which she had made of Bletchley Church, for Eleanor Armstrong, while Miss Warrington was occupied with the daily paper, the solitary luxury in which she indulged, she was startled by an exclamation from the old lady, which was immediately followed by her reading aloud the paragraph by which it had been called forth.

"Listen, Gertrude," she said, in that accent of quiet complacency in which elderly persons are wont to indulge while promulgating any species of news : "'On Tuesday morning, at the parish church of Westrum, by the Rev. James Ingatesby, M.A., Frederic Mortimer, Esq., of Westrum House, to Sybil, only daughter of the late William Delamere, Esq.'" So your cousin is married, you see ; and married without having the civility to apprise you of it beforehand."

But Gertrude made no reply. The pencil dropped from her hand, and it was only by a fearful effort that she preserved herself from fainting. All was then, indeed, over. The prayers of her dying aunt, the hopes of long years, her silent but deep affection—all had alike failed. As she saw herself definitively and for ever separated from her cousin, the love which she had done so much to overcome welled up afresh, and she felt as though she had just listened to her death-warrant.

It was in vain that she sought to disguise her emotion.

Pale, panting, and bewildered, she gazed hopelessly around her, but every object appeared to swim before her eyes; she tried to think, but a mist was over her spirit, she could not combine the images which were floating across her brain; and at length, conscious that she could not much longer support the constraint under which she was then suffering, she murmured a few disjointed and almost inaudible words, and tottered from the apartment.

When the dinner was announced Gertrude was still in her room, where she was found by the servant who went to summon her, stretched lifeless upon the bed.

Painful, very painful, were the solitary hours which she spent in that narrow and cheerless chamber; only the less wretched, however, that they *were* solitary. There she had leisure to contemplate all the circumstances of her position, to weep over the memories of the past, and to shudder at the dreariness of the future. How had she deceived herself in believing that she had almost succeeded in overcoming her affection—how bitterly was she taught to feel that there is a depth in the human heart which, once stirred, is long, very long, ere its waters again subside!

Poor girl! the strongest link in her existence had been rudely and abruptly rent asunder. It was Frederic who was the one bond between her and the past; and now she must remember him, and love him only as the husband of Sybil; of that Sybil who had come between her and happiness, and rendered her an outcast from the home of her youth. To her Frederic could be nothing now; nothing, save a sad memory. All his thoughts, all his cares, all his tenderness, must henceforth be devoted to the woman whom he had taken to his heart. She only had now the right to watch over him in sickness, to weep with him in sorrow, and to soothe him in disappointment. And how would she fulfil her holy mission?

“Oh, well, well!” murmured Gertrude to herself, as the question rose in her pure heart, “she *must* do so, for Frederic loves her!”

And then her own hot tears rained down to feel that another had usurped the blessed duties which she would have performed so zealously. She thought not of sharing the brilliant fortune of her cousin, of indulging in the luxuries which it would command, or of claiming her share in the

sunny hours of his existence; she dwelt only upon *home*, upon the chances and changes which might come even to him, and on those moments when the tenderness of a wife transcends all other consolations.

Vainly, however, did she dwell upon these thoughts: the conviction soon followed that for her no such hallowed duty was destined, but that Frederic was lost to her for ever; nor could she now, without guilt, even encourage a wish that it were otherwise. Had she been told a week, only a week beforehand, that his marriage was irrevocably decided, she believed that she could have schooled both her heart and her reason into submission. Had he written her a few lines of kindness and affection, she believed that she could have reconciled herself to what he would then have once more assured her was to him an earnest of happiness; but to learn that all was over through the cold medium of a public print, to feel that she had been forgotten, while her whole heart was full of his image; this it was, as she fancied, which made the blow so heavy to be borne: and so she tried to cheat herself into the belief that she loved him less, even while she felt that she could not deceive herself.

Let the world read matters as it will—and “he who runs may read”—there is yet a volume which it cannot unclothe in its reckless haste and egotism, without pausing longer than it is prone to do, ere it can hope to comprehend its pages—the weary but glorious volume of the human heart; weary, because it holds so much of woe—glorious, because it contains so much of hope.

CHAPTER XXX.

Too proud to yield to the influence of a neglected passion, Gertrude struggled resolutely against the wretchedness which swelled her young and desolate heart almost to bursting.

Perhaps it was well for her that she had to strive also against the suspicions of her anxious hostess; whose blunted sensibilities, although they were unequal to sympathise

with what she regarded as the mere nervous absurdities of fanciful and pampered young people, were not, however, sufficiently obtuse to deaden the curiosity which led her to seek an immediate cause for their development; and thus Gertrude soon discovered the necessity of controlling her feelings in the presence of her aunt, and of checking the tears which at intervals rose to her burning eye-balls. And the task was a hard and a bitter one; for, like many other well-meaning but ill-judging persons, Miss Warrington no sooner heard the apothecary, who had been called in, declare that his patient was simply suffering from moral depression and debility, and required only amusement, unattended with exertion, to restore her to health, than she installed herself daily for hours in the sick-room, where, in default of other subjects of conversation, she descanted perpetually on the very themes which the poor girl would fain have avoided; and that with a voluble pertinacity which rendered their exhaustion hopeless.

“It is fortunate, however, Mr. Pilbeam, very fortunate,” she said upon one occasion, as the apothecary seated himself by the bed-side, and strove to rally the spirits of Gertrude by an assurance that, in a short time, she would be enabled to leave her room, “very fortunate, indeed, that there is really no danger, for I should scarcely have known how to act had you given me cause to apprehend the contrary. A month, or I may say only a week ago, I could have written to apprise her cousin, who is her nearest relation—for I am but her great-aunt, and should, consequently, have declined all responsibility in such a case; but at this moment I don’t know where to find him, as he is just married, and is probably on his wedding-tour. In my time people were satisfied to remain at home on such occasions to feast their tenantry, and keep open house; but now they consider it correct to run away from their friends as though they had done something that they were ashamed of; such being the case we do not know where to address him. However, as Gertrude is better, we can afford to wait until he is again at Westrum. As for myself, I confess that I felt little or no alarm at her illness; for, on the day of her arrival here I remarked to Hannah that I did not believe she had an ounce of blood in her veins; and

she even now looks better than when she first came to Bletchley."

"You may be quite easy upon the subject, my dear madam; in a few days we shall have Miss Mortimer in the drawing-room. But we must be careful to protect her from all unnecessary excitement, as her nerves are evidently very susceptible."

"You would rather, perhaps, that she should not yet see the Miss Armstrongs, who have called every day, and are half offended that I have not allowed them to come up stairs?"

"On the contrary, my dear lady, on the contrary," briskly exclaimed Mr. Pilbeam, who would rather have risked a relapse in his patient than the chance of displeasing the family at the Manor-house, "their visit can only be beneficial to Miss Mortimer, as I understand that they have already become very intimate. A great privilege that for the young lady, my dear madam, a very great privilege, and not extended beyond herself as regards this immediate neighbourhood. You have heard, I suppose, that Mr. Armstrong is *in*. Some rumour, to be sure, of bribery, and that kind of thing, but it is of course all local gossip; and as I often say to Mrs. Pilbeam, when she occasionally reports these small matters over our tea-table, *tempus omnia revelat*—at all even's, I never give an opinion; no professional man should, eh?"

There was no reply.

"And now, my dear madam, I will take my leave," said the dapper little apothecary, resuming his hat and cane, "and I trust that, by the termination of the honeymoon, my fair patient will be in a fit condition to pay her bridal visit. Nothing like change of scene and cheerful society in such a case; eh, my dear Miss Mortimer? What say you to my prescription?"

Gertrude said nothing. Her mightiest effort at endurance and self-control would only enable her to torture her faded lips into a ghastly smile, as she took the hand which he tendered on his departure, ere she turned her weary and aching head upon her pillow and strove to escape at once from the light of day and the sound of human voices.

But no such escape was to be hers. Miss Warrington, excited by her own unusual activity, and deeply offended

by what she considered as an undue presumption on the part of Mr. Pilbeam, whom she detested both for his babble and his bill, no sooner heard the street door close behind him than she continued to vent her hoarded ill-humour upon Mortimer; and poor Gertrude was compelled to endure all the outpouring of her wrath.

"The accidental allusion to your cousin's marriage, my dear," she resumed, as she installed her perpendicual person, according to her own idea of comfort, in the large arm-chair just vacated by the diligent apothecary, "reminds me—I say nothing of myself: I am an old woman, and the days are past when it was considered necessary to show any regard to the feelings of such useless individuals as old women, when they chance to be poor—but it reminds me, as I was about to say, that Mr. Mortimer has treated you with great disrespect, in not writing to inform you of his intended marriage. He might be very much engaged; I dare say he was; people generally are, I believe, at such times: but still, half-an-hour is no great matter, and half-an-hour might always be spared for such a purpose. I confess that I feel very indignant at so singular and marked a slight; for it is a slight, Gertrude, look at it as you will; you may be poor, but you are as well-born and as well-bred as himself, and he has no right to look down upon you."

"Indeed, my dear aunt, you mistake him," faltered the poor girl, tortured to the very soul; "Frederic is incapable of such a feeling."

"I am glad to hear it," replied the old lady, in that provoking tone which implies a resolute opposition of sentiment; "very glad, for it would degrade him, not you. But, be this as it may, his conduct has been very extraordinary."

"Spare me, I entreat of you," exclaimed Gertrude piteously; "did you understand the nature of Frederic, you would feel how impossible it was for him to act otherwise than he has done!"

"Well, my dear child, do not agitate yourself," replied the old lady, somewhat alarmed by the violence of her emotion; we will say no more upon the subject. I understand it all now—the lady was jealous of your pretty face; and perhaps she was right. But keep up

your spirits, and that pretty face may stand your friend yet."

Day after day, almost hour after hour, did these corroding conversations occur, until Gertrude, who would fain have herself forgotten all beyond the narrow circle of her present home, more than once found herself upon the very point of confiding to Miss Warrington the bitter, but still cherished secret of the past, in order to silence her for ever. More than once did the confession tremble on her tongue; but as she raised her eyes to the rigid and passionless countenance, and then dropped them upon the compressed and bony fingers before her, the blood rushed back upon her heart, and she continued to endure in silence.

Not even the persevering affection of the amiable inmates of the Manor-house could counteract the evil effect of this constant demand upon her fortitude. She gradually withered, until even Mr. Pilbeam himself began to apprehend that the disease which he had at first treated so lightly, was in fact too deep-seated to be overcome; and, thus impressed, he ventured to suggest to Miss Warrington the necessity of an immediate change of scene. Better, as he shrewdly and philosophically decided in his own mind, if she must die—and die he had by this time become convinced she would—that it should be anywhere rather than under his hands.

It was easy to suggest such an arrangement; and, in former years, it would have been equally easy for the orphan to have acquiesced in it at once; but now she instantly negatived the proposition, for she had begun to comprehend the nature of that poverty which so pertinaciously intrudes its gaunt hand, close-clenched, before the moral vision of the needy, and compels them to feel their helplessness.

It was but on the morrow after the medical fiat had gone forth, that Mary and Eleanor Armstrong once more arrived at the modest dwelling of Miss Warrington, laden, as was their custom, with fruit and flowers; but also, on this occasion, radiant with delight. Mr. Pilbeam had just left the Manor-house, where, in answer to the earnest inquiries of the Squire for his fair favourite, he had reiterated his opinion of the necessity of an imme-

diatè change of air and scene, and they had come as ambassadors from their mother to claim the society of Gertrude for a few weeks.

The cheeks and brow of the sick girl flushed with happiness for a moment, but in the next instant the glow faded, and her heart sank. She felt that she would rather be left free to indulge her sorrow, than compelled to make a renewed effort for existence. She was perishing then, she knew, slowly but surely; and could she only have escaped the unintentional persecutions of her aunt, she would have rejoiced to linger out her remaining days in peace and solitude, and gradually to emancipate herself from every earthly affection.

Under this impression of helplessness, Gertrude urged the utter impossibility of contending, in her present state of weakness, against the stir and bustle of an establishment like that of the Manor-house, at a period so exciting as the close of a successfully-contested election; but her objection was instantly met by the assurance that all the local duties of hospitality contingent upon that success had been already fulfilled, and that early on the morrow both Mr. Armstrong and his son would depart for town.

"Thus you see, my dear frightened Gertrude," said Eleanor persuasively, "that you will be as quiet with us as in your own tranquil home, for our party will consist only of my mother and ourselves, and Mr. Somerville, who, for some reason which Mary can perhaps explain, appears at the present moment to have a decided disinclination to visit London. As for Ernest, he too, from some unaccountable cause, seemed this morning to share the sentiment of his friend; but he could not, of course, be excused; so go he must, and will; but he bade me not forget to say that it was he who gathered the grapes, and selected the flowers which we have brought, in order that you might be assured how truly he sympathises with the rest of his family in their anxiety for your recovery. So now we have only to obtain the consent of our kind Miss Warrington to this little arrangement, and to carry you off to-morrow so soon as we have taken leave of papa."

It was impossible to resist the earnest kindness of such an invitation; and, accordingly, on the following evening

Gertrude found herself established under the hospitable roof of the Armstrongs, and surrounded by the most affectionate attentions. The effect of so genial a change alike upon her health and spirits was great and rapid; and if her heart was occasionally wrung by the spectacle of Mary's radiant happiness, as she contrasted it with her own forlorn condition, she found support and comfort in the knowledge that her struggles were unguessed at by those about her, and exerted herself to secure her secret so successfully that there were even moments in which she ceased to feel its weight.

Thus three weeks passed over; and Mr. Pilbeam himself began to feel that his visits were becoming supererogatory, as he saw an occasional bloom once more suffuse the pale cheek of his beautiful patient, and a light dance in her eye; but, like Mrs. Armstrong, he stringently objected to her return home until her health should be more unequivocally restored; and Gertrude, although she still endeavoured to discover a thousand reasons for terminating her visit, was in reality happy to find that they were all overruled in turn. To Eleanor she had become almost essential, for the whole time and attention of Mary were engrossed by Somerville, who had proved so efficient an auxiliary during the election, that he had won the heart of the Squire as well as that of his daughter; and thus the two younger girls were seldom separated, and all the various attainments of the orphan were in time discovered and estimated by her amiable but less gifted friend. Arm in arm they wandered through the richly-wooded grounds of the Manor-house, or loitered upon the border of the graceful little stream which laved their boundaries; and Eleanor learned to love and to appreciate a host of natural beauties upon which she had previously looked almost with indifference.

An unusual stir as they approached the house on one occasion prepared them for some arrival; and they had scarcely entered the hall, when Eleanor was in her brother's arms; but he held her there only for an instant ere he turned to greet her companion. Beautiful as she looked, however, as she stood before him with extended hand and smiling lip, her simple white dress displaying to advantage all the symmetry of her frail but graceful

figure, her bonnet in her hand, and her luxuriant hair still garlanded with the flowers which Eleanor had twined about it, the young man could not suppress a start as his eye fell upon her. The expression of her face was so languid, the outline of her always delicate features so much sharpened, and her whole appearance so strongly indicative of suffering, that he felt a pang at his heart, and a vague terror, which he dared not trust himself to define.

For the first time, a suspicion that Gertrude was the prey of some secret sorrow, against which she had struggled until her strength had failed beneath the conflict, pressed upon his spirit; and, as the idea grew in strength, despite all his efforts to suppress it, he began to comprehend the extent of his feeling towards her. What would he not have given at that moment to have possessed the power of reading her heart, and of soothing her sorrows, be they what they might! but this he knew to be impossible; and thus he spoke to her only of her sickness, of her recovery, and of his gladness on finding her a guest in his father's house; while Gertrude, unsuspicious of the emotion which rendered the expression of even these commonplace greetings difficult to him, simply thanked him with her sad sweet smile, and hastened to her apartment, in order not to restrain, by her presence, the mutual communications of the family.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AFTER the return of Ernest Armstrong the house gradually became filled with company, and it required all the resolution which Gertrude could command, to enable her to endure this constant demand upon her energies, without falling back into her original depression; and yet, strange to say, she no longer felt an inclination to return to her desolate home. Too sadly aware that Miss Warrington was more than reconciled to her absence by the reflection that it decreased the expenses of her narrow household, and once more habituated to the voice of sym-

pathy and kindness, she shuddered as she remembered that the day must soon come in which she should once more be deprived of all this luxury of affection, and when her restored health would no longer afford her a pretext for extending her already lengthy visit.

The bustle and movement consequent upon the influx of visitors wearied and saddened her, but she found an equivalent in the perpetual and brotherly kindness of Ernest, who, pleading the necessity of Eleanor's more general attention to their other guests, was constantly occupied in securing the comfort and amusement of the orphan. Nor was he diverted from his work of sympathy even by the smiles of the highborn beauties who now graced his mother's drawing-room, or the example of his own sporting companions, who, on their return from shooting, fishing, or boating, divided their remaining time between billiards and flirtation.

And all these attentions were so carefully as well as so zealously proffered that they excited no remark, even among the idlest and the most sarcastic of his associates. The beautiful invalid, with her pale brow and her dove-like eyes, was known to be an orphan, and a portionless one, while Ernest Armstrong was one of the best matches in the country, and, consequently, not one of his friends could for a moment believe him to be mad enough to dream of marrying her. No, no; young Armstrong might waste his time in dangling about a pretty girl who was going to her grave, and thus show the Lady James and the Honourable Miss Lucys that he was not a marrying man—which, by the bye, was rather clever on his part—but, beyond this, of course there was nothing to be said; and so the "capital match" was left in peace to follow the dictates of his own heart and his own reason. Perhaps there were moments in which Eleanor felt startled, but she, too, believed it to be impossible that her fastidious and ambitious brother could seriously love the niece of old stingy Miss Warrington; and she had, moreover, become so seriously attached to Gertrude that she would not be convinced.

And Gertrude herself, even while she was grateful, deeply grateful, for the unwearied and gentle kindness of which she was the object, never for an instant con-
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tured that it had another source than generous pity to a suffering fellow-creature. She only felt that she was no longer alone in the world; that there were now two beings to whom her sufferings were not indifferent, and who would mourn over her were they to terminate as she had once hoped. She knew not that a great moral change was taking place within her, by which the image of Mortimer was fading more rapidly from her heart than time could have effaced it.

It chanced that on a sweet autumnal morning Gertrude found herself alone in the music-room, where she had been engaged in tuning Eleanor's harp, and, having completed her task, she stood for a time at one of the low windows opening to the lawn, until at length, feeling invigorated by the soft balmy wind which was wakening the leaves to that low, luxurious, and mystic whisper, which seems to speak to us in the language of another and a more harmonious world, she stepped out upon the velvet sward, and bared her brow to its gentle influence.

The sound of distant voices and ringing laughter reached her from the open windows of the house, and jarred with the soft serenity of the scene on which she looked; and, in order to secure a more perfect sense of solitude, she strolled onward under the flickering shadows of the shrubbery, and followed, with a languid step, the windings of a flower-bordered path, which led to an eminence commanding a view of the village of Bletchley and the surrounding country.

For awhile she stood entranced; tears filled her eyes, but they were tears of gratitude and praise. Soon, however, she became conscious that she had overtaxed her strength, and, slowly descending the height, she diverged towards the garden pavilion, in order to rest for a time before she returned to the house. The creeping roses, honeysuckles, and clematis by which it was overgrown had been suffered to run wild, and nearly obscured the entrance; but, putting them aside, Gertrude stepped lightly across the threshold, and started with mingled surprise and annoyance to find herself intruding upon the privacy of Ernest Armstrong. A bright flush rose to the cheek of the young man as he bounded from the bench upon which he had been seated, and suffered his

book to fall from his hand in his eagerness to welcome her.

"Gertrude—Miss Mortimer," he exclaimed, as he sprang forward to lead her to the seat which he had just abandoned; for, in her embarrassment, she had continued standing upon the same spot, without making an effort to advance, "Miss Mortimer here—and alone! By what happy chance——"

"Forgive me, Mr. Armstrong," faltered Gertrude, as she sank exhausted alike by fatigue and distress upon the bench, "I did not mean to invade your privacy. I thought you were with your friends."

"I dare not flatter myself that you sought my society," he said, looking anxiously upon her; "but surely, Gertrude, you are ill or unhappy. What has happened?"

"Nothing, believe me, nothing; but I have been imprudent. I have ascended the mound, forgetting that my strength is not equal to the exertion, and I came here to rest awhile. Pray forgive me."

"Surely you jest," was the impetuous reply. "Oh, Gertrude, if you could only guess how I have sighed for this moment—this moment of happiness—when I may assure you of all my respect, all my regard!"

"I have long felt, long acknowledged it," murmured the fair girl, as she looked up gratefully and confidingly.

"Would that the conviction had served me better!" said Ernest, still retaining her hand; "would that it had induced you to confide more fully in a friendship in which you admit that you have faith. Gertrude, you are not happy. You have a hidden sorrow. I have long been convinced of this. Your painful illness has been an effect, not a cause. Seek not to deceive me. To common observers you may indeed be only an invalid crushed by mere physical ailment, but to me you are the prey of a deeper suffering."

The orphan answered only with her tears.

"Gertrude," persisted the young man, as he seated himself beside her, "you have given me a right to consider myself your friend, give me likewise cause to feel that I indeed am so. Remember that you have become the adopted child of our house—that we have all learned to love you. Have I, then, no claim to ask for some answering trust?"

Perhaps I may be indiscreet, but did you know how cold every tear that you shed falls upon my heart you would forgive me."

A sudden faintness came over the orphan. She began to understand him—to understand herself—and she trembled at the revelation. She strove to withdraw her hand—she strove to rise and escape—but her agitation was too powerful.

"Gertrude!" exclaimed her companion, reproachfully, "you do not do me justice."

"Oh! recal that accusation, for pity's sake," faltered the stricken girl; "I know and feel that you are indeed my friend."

"And is that all, Gertrude? Is that all which you have felt and known? Have I, indeed, made myself so little understood? Or is it that you are indifferent to an affection which has now become to me a principle of existence?"

The orphan buried her face in her hands, and the hot tears streamed through her fingers.

"It must be as you will, Gertrude," said Ernest, as he started from her side, and paced hurriedly across the narrow floor; "but you know not how devoted a heart you would reject—you know not the depth of the affection which you would throw from you—you cannot guess the treasure of love which I have hoarded up only to cast it at your feet: you may be loved again, but never, never again as now."

Gertrude looked up in alarm; her heart beat violently, and the tears were arrested in her eyes.

"No, no," she exclaimed, passionately, "you mistake yourself, Mr. Armstrong, and imagine that the generous sympathy which you have felt for me has grown into affection. But this cannot, must not be. As yet we are almost strangers; you are the only son of wealthy and powerful parents, while I am poor and friendless. You are full of life and hope and happiness, while I am already faded and crushed by trial and misfortune. How would your proud father brook such a marriage? Forget that you have ever conceived so wild a thought. Be just to yourself, and leave me at least the consolation of feeling that I have not lost a friend."

"You reason, Gertrude," said the young man, reproach-

fully, "where you should only feel. You disdain the heart which you have made your own."

"Do not mistake me," sobbed the orphan; "I am already sufficiently unhappy. But remember my position. Remember the friendship and affection which have been lavished upon me by your family, and then ask yourself if I could indeed listen to you without ingratitude? Deeply, very deeply, do I feel my obligation for such a proof of your regard, but I beseech you, if you would not expose me to the most bitter self-reproach, to bestow the warmer feelings of your heart upon another."

"Enough, Miss Mortimer," said her companion, haughtily, "I will endeavour to obey you. I have, in truth, been worse than blind not to comprehend that your affection has been already bestowed elsewhere. I have now only to apologise for my presumption, and to wish you a happier fate than that which I would have secured to you."

As he ceased speaking he seized his hat, and rushed from the pavilion.

As he disappeared Gertrude made a movement as though she would have detained him, for at that moment she felt as though she was once more about to become an alien from her kind. She was at last conscious that even while she believed herself to be living upon the memory of the past, she was in fact learning to love Ernest Armstrong, a lesson in which she had progressed but too well; and now she saw herself again thrust back upon the desolation of her own heart. The impulse was, however, only momentary; her better principle retained her in her seat; she might be wretched, but she would still continue blameless; she would not repay the trusting friendship of a whole family by blighting their proudest hopes; and thus her extended hands were withdrawn, her labouring sobs were suffered to have way, and, finally, her head sank upon the rustic table before her, and she wept as those only can weep who see all the hopes of their existence shivered about them.

Forgetting alike where she was, and the time which had elapsed since she left the house, she remained for more than an hour sunk in a torpor of grief which scarcely allowed her to retain the faculty of thought. She only knew that she was wretched, very wretched; she only felt

that her last luxury lay in the hot tears which were coursing each other down her pallid cheeks, when she was suddenly startled by the sound of a deep sigh immediately behind her.

She turned in alarm, and saw Ernest Armstrong standing a few paces from the bench upon which she was seated.

"Gertrude," he said, with deep emotion, "tell me the truth. I left you angry and miserable, but my anger could not last, nor can I longer endure my misery. As you hope for happiness in this life, be frank with me. Have I a share in those tears?"

"Mr. Armstrong," faltered the orphan, as she extended to him her trembling hand, "should I be worthy of all the friendship which you have shown to me for so many months if I could have witnessed unmoved the displeasure with which you lately quitted me? Oh! surely, surely you, at least, should know me better!"

"And what more, Gertrude?" asked Ernest, again seating himself beside her. "Have I returned only to receive so formal an assurance as this? Do you believe me to be so weak, so frivolous, so unworthy, as to have sought your love without long and earnest reflection? Only tell me that it is not given to another, and, even although it should not yet be mine, I will await your will. I will struggle to deserve your preference and to secure your happiness. I will be everything that you shall seek to make me."

"I dare not listen to such words from your lips, Mr. Armstrong," murmured Gertrude, as she endeavoured to rise from her seat.

"You shall not leave the pavilion, Gertrude, until my question is answered," said her companion, resolutely. "This day—this very hour—I must know my fate, and then, Gertrude, then you will have made me the happiest man on earth, or—we meet no more."

"Meet no more!" gasped the orphan, unconsciously echoing his words in an accent of such heart-struck anguish as rendered all further explanation superfluous.

"You are mine—deny it not, Gertrude—you are mine," murmured the delighted young man, as he suddenly clasped her to his bosom. "Nay, chide me not—I will—

I will release you—but no disclaimers. Reason as you will now, and I will listen; I have not loved you in vain, and all else I can support. Why do you turn away in displeasure, Gertrude? Are you offended by my joy? Nay, do not leave your seat; I will abandon mine if you condemn me to so great a sacrifice, but do not drive me from you. See, I have even released your hand. What would you more?”

“Listen to me,” said the weeping girl, struggling against the emotion which had dyed her cheeks and brow with a crimson blush. “Weak and unworthy as I feel such an avowal to be, I will no longer deny that—that—in short, Mr. Armstrong——”

“Call me Ernest.”

“In short,” pursued the orphan, heedless of the interruption, “unconsciously—oh, believe me, most unconsciously, I have treacherously repaid the kindness of your family, by suffering myself to feel—to feel as I should not have done towards one for whom they have higher and prouder hopes.”

“They all love you, Gertrude.”

“But will they continue to do so when they learn how ill I have requited their friendship?”

“Will they not be indebted to you for my happiness, which is their first care?”

Gertrude shook her head despondingly. She had already learnt a bitter lesson in the world’s lore, and she remembered that she was poor and powerless.

“Gertrude,” smiled her more sanguine companion, “have you no faith in my influence over the family which you appear so much to dread? I am aware that my good father will look grave, and talk of expediency, and prudence, and all those matters of which elderly gentlemen are accustomed to make bugbears to the young; but I shall appeal from his head to his heart, and I have never yet made such an appeal in vain. He already loves you as a child. Is it your fault if you are dearer to me than all else on earth? Are you to blame if you are lovelier and more estimable than others of your sex? Trust me, the day is not far distant when all under our roof will bless you for having rendered it both holier and happier.”

“I will endeavour to believe so,” murmured Gertrude

with a faint smile; "but until I am welcomed by Mr. Armstrong himself, this subject must never be renewed between us. To-day I must remain at the Hall, for I feel that I have not strength to encounter the fatigue of a removal; but to-morrow I shall return to the humble home which I ought never to have quitted; and then—" she concluded with a burst of tears, which she strove in vain to suppress—"then it will depend upon your father if I ever again become his guest."

Ernest was about to expostulate; but, as he looked into the eyes of his companion, he read there a determination against which he felt that it were vain to contend; and, accordingly, he raised her hand respectfully to his lips in silence.

"And now leave me," said Gertrude, imploringly, "if, indeed, you love me, leave me alone to think. I have need of thought; alas! I fear, too much; but, at least, spare me all further self-reproach."

"Do you regret my happiness?"

Once more she smiled through her tears, and he felt that he was answered.

"And you will wear this rose for my sake, Gertrude, will you not?" whispered the young man, tenderly, as he broke away a branch of the flowering parasite which trailed across the entrance of the pavilion.

"I will, if you obey, and leave me now."

"I am gone," was the murmured reply, and still he lingered.

Five minutes more wore away; and then the blooming branches were hurriedly thrust aside, and he sprang lightly into the sunshine; looked back for a second into the depths of the rustic apartment, and disappeared among the tall shrubs near its entrance.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ERNEST had no sooner departed than Gertrude sunk upon her knees. Divided between happiness and self-reproach, she had no longer power to trust to her own strength.

She passed her hand over her throbbing eye-balls, as though she sought to awaken from a wild dream, but all was still vivid in its truth. The branch of roses lay on the table beside her; the book, upon which Ernest had been engaged when she entered remained where it had fallen from his hand; strive as she would, there was no room for doubt.

Ere long her thoughts wandered to Mr. Armstrong, and she trembled as she reflected upon his probable indignation; while, solitary as she was, and although no eye was upon her, a blush of mingled pride and shame rose to her brow as she pictured to herself the reproaches which he would fasten upon the penniless orphan, who had accepted his hospitality only to blight the prospects of his son; and she bowed her head, self-convicted, and would at that moment gladly have forgone all her newly-born hopes of happiness to escape his just rebuke.

As this conviction grew upon her she wept over herself, for she felt that she was indeed a bankrupt in all that makes life brilliant; and a thousand times did she upbraid herself for the selfishness which had led her to listen to the addresses of such a suitor.

Repentance, however, came too late; and, apprehensive that, should she longer delay her return to the house, her absence might create some alarm as to her safety in the mind of Eleanor, Gertrude, rousing herself from her abstraction, smoothed the tangled hair upon her brow, bathed her swollen eyes, and carefully lifting the cherished rose-branch, which had been the first gift of love, from the table, folded her shawl about her, and turned slowly in the direction of the Hall.

What a change had taken place in her whole destiny during the last few hours!—what a change in all her feelings! She scarcely knew whether to rejoice or to mourn on finding that she had voluntarily flung from her all the old associations of years; and was almost ready to ask herself if, indeed, a new scheme of happiness could grow out of the ashes of the past. Moreover, Gertrude, meek as she was, possessed, nevertheless, a proud spirit; and, when she reflected upon the time in which her hand would have been eagerly sought, while now it could scarcely be that her alliance would be more than coldly welcomed by the family

of Mr. Armstrong, while it might even be scornfully rejected, tears of wounded feeling rose to her eyes, and she felt tempted to recant her concession, limited as it had been.

All these internal combats weakened both her mental and physical strength, and she became convinced that, even had not a sense of propriety dictated the measure, an immediate removal from the exhausting gaieties of the Hall was necessary to the preservation of her convalescence, while her absence would tend to test the consistency of her suitor; and it was accordingly with a firm resolution to carry out her project of departure, that she at length reached the house, pale and languid, only to be tenderly chidden for her imprudence in wandering out alone in her then state of weakness.

The announcement of her intended return home on the morrow, elicited still more remonstrance. Eleanor could not spare her; Mr. Armstrong, on his arrival, would be annoyed to find that she had left them before her health was thoroughly re-established; Mary revealed the secret of a projected fishing-party, where she affectionately assured her that she would be indispensable, a declaration in which she was warmly seconded by Somerville; and the old lady insisted upon several points, so strangely involved that it was difficult to comprehend their bearing upon the case. One individual only remained totally silent throughout the whole discussion, and that one was Ernest: he heard even the guests of his mother join in the general entreaty, and saw tears of gratification stand in the soft eyes of the fair girl as she replied to each appeal; and still he sat by, apparently engaged with a newspaper, and without uttering a sentence.

At length, Eleanor, distressed, and almost annoyed, to find all her endeavours fail in changing the resolution of her friend, suddenly turned towards her brother for assistance, exclaiming, eagerly—

“Am I not right, Ernest? Do you not consider Gertrude very imprudent to leave us yet?”

“If you really desire my opinion,” was the reply, and to every eye, save one, it was calmly and almost indifferently uttered, “I consider that if Miss Mortimer conceives it to be necessary and right to return to Bletchley, she should

be left free to follow the dictates of her own judgment ; but should she happily see cause in an hour or two to alter her opinion, she knows how much she has it in her power to oblige us all."

"And yet you persist, Gertrude," said Eleanor, reproachfully.

And Gertrude did persist ; and the following day saw her once more an inmate of the humble dwelling of Miss Warrington ; enduring, as best she might, the condolences of her companion upon her pale cheeks and nerveless step ; her inferences as to their cause, and her regret that she did not possess more self-command.

During the last eventful evening at the Hall Gertrude had found an opportunity to forbid the visits of Ernest ; and, with right-minded delicacy, had also interdicted all correspondence until the decision of his father should have been made. In vain did the young man expostulate upon what he termed the overstrained and unnecessary cruelty of this arrangement : she was firm.

"Should Mr. Armstrong consent," she said, meekly, "the privation will ultimately have been unimportant ; should it prove otherwise, we have already met too often, and I owe it both to you and myself to terminate our intercourse at once."

Strong in her sense of right, to this resolution she adhered ; and, finding that it was in vain to oppose her will, Ernest could only declare a determination in his turn to proceed at once to town in order to have an immediate interview with his father, and by these means shorten the period of their separation.

Thus the orphan found herself once more almost alone ; for, although she had become more dear than ever to the friends whom she had left, they were less able than before to devote a portion of their time to her. The duties which the presence of their numerous guests imposed upon them, and which were rendered still more imperative by the sudden and incomprehensible desertion of Ernest, confined them strictly to their own immediate circle ; and, had it not been for the kindly messages and affectionate notes which constantly reached her, Gertrude might have found some trouble in reconciling herself to the conviction that the old Hall

and its warm-hearted inhabitants still remained in her neighbourhood.

Moreover, long and weary days went by, and there were no news of Ernest. He had failed, then, and he left her to divine that failure in his silence. Once more she was scorned—once more her heart was widowed; and she, who had believed for many many months of heaviness that she could never love again, had suffered herself once more to hope only to be once more deceived. Such was at last her firm conviction; and although she wept over the loss of such a heart as that which she had won, she did not yield, as on a former occasion, to this new weight of woe. Her woman-pride nerved her to support the trial with dignity, and there were moments in which she found herself mentally consoling Ernest under a disappointment which she strove to consider as inevitable. And then she glanced at her own future existence, when all should be indeed over between them; but the anticipation chilled her, and she closed her eyes as if to shut out the vision. Enough that it was hers to live and suffer; he, at least, might soon again be joyous and happy as she had first known him. A thousand cares, and avocations, and hopes, would wean her from his memory, and he would be restored to his family and to himself, when she was—forgotten!

Such a consolation fell cold upon her heart, and so time wore on, until three weary weeks had expired, and the faint hectic which had almost disappeared from the cheek of the orphan began once more to tinge the delicate skin; a low cough was occasionally heard to escape from her pallid lips; and the cold moisture which bathed her brow rendered the long tresses by which it was shaded languid and dull.

To Miss Warrington these changes were imperceptible; but Mr. Pilbeam was more clear-sighted; and he ere long began to insist with extreme pertinacity upon her instant return to the Hall. Gertrude was, however, inflexible; attributing her weakness to the extreme sultriness of the season, and the difficulty which it induced in her breathing; while, to her infinite relief, she found herself supported in her argument by her aunt, who, having become sufficiently attached to her society to find her renewed solitude irksome, strongly opposed her removal.

Baffled at the cottage, the little apothecary, seriously alarmed for his patient, and not altogether indifferent to the *clat* of a visit to the Hall, when it was known throughout the neighbourhood that Miss Mortimer was no longer its inhabitant, hastened to tell his tale of fear, and to hint his wishes to Mrs. Armstrong; but once more he was destined to disappointment. The good old lady shed a shower of tears as she learnt the relapse of her favourite; Eleanor turned pale, and clung to a chair for support; while Mary loudly and earnestly expressed her grief; but beyond these demonstrations of interest and affection, none of them progressed. In vain did he declare the necessity for immediate change of air and habits; in vain did he remark how wonderfully beneficial her residence at the Hall had proved upon a previous occasion; in vain did he imply the expediency of her instant return; he was listened to with consideration and anxiety, but all his strategy proved fruitless; and, at length, feeling that he had no right, and should, moreover, be very impolitic to endeavour to force upon the mistress of the house a guest, who had, from some cause or other, evidently ceased to be welcome beneath her roof, he reluctantly rose and took his leave; although not until he had promised to give Mrs. Armstrong constant intelligence of his patient.

Mr. Pilbeam ruminated as he descended the hill on his return homeward, upon the probable cause of so marked and unfavourable a change. It was true that all the ladies of the family had deeply felt his communication, but they had studiously confined their comments upon Miss Mortimer to the subject of her illness; and they had evidently avoided with the greatest care all reply to his inferred proposition. What could it mean? Mrs. Pilbeam elucidated the mystery at once.

It was, she declared, precisely what might have been expected. What could the Hall people want with poor Miss Warrington's niece but to make use of her? And what use could she be of now, when they had a houseful of friends to amuse them? She couldn't help saying, however, that she was very glad of it; for, when people set themselves up to be better than other people, it did them good to have their pride pulled down; though she must confess that she was very sorry the poor girl fretted so

much, although, if there was no sickness among the gentry, Mr. Pilbeam would be reduced to practise upon his parish poor, which was neither pleasant nor profitable; so that everything was for the best, after all.

Gertrude was wretched, for she was hopeless; but even this hopelessness served to sustain her. As she had nothing now to anticipate, so also she had nothing to fear. Her fate was accomplished. And yet, she felt that one parting explanation might have been vouchsafed to her; and her pride was wrung, that although the letters of Eleanor, after having reached her at longer intervals, and then ceased altogether, had seemed to announce a cessation of all friendship, the daily present of game, or fruit, or flowers, had never failed. It was as though they had withdrawn their regard, and now conceded only their compassion.

The sensitive delicacy of the orphan was deeply wounded; and while her aunt constantly expatiated upon the persevering attentions of her new friends, the unhappy orphan turned sickening from the dainties for which she was indebted to them, and suffered the most rare and beautiful flowers to wither for want of tendance, or banished them from her room upon the plea that they affected her breathing. There was, however, one faded rose-branch which she cherished, although colour and scent had long since departed from it; her heart was not yet so full as to shut out that cherished memory.

Become too feeble to walk unattended, Gertrude was soon compelled to content herself with the air which she could procure through an open window; and there she remained seated for hours, with a book or a needle in her hand, listening abstractedly to the economical dissertations of her rigid aunt, and lost in a maze of painful thought.

She was so sitting upon one occasion, on a sweet evening, when the glow of the setting sun shed a golden glory over her pale features, and glistened amid her long languid curls, and thinking, as was her habit, of the quiet grave which would so soon bury alike her and her griefs, in all the luxury of solitude, Miss Warrington having left the room upon some household duty, when she suddenly became conscious of a thick and hurried breathing, which betrayed that some stranger had paused beside her. Easily alarmed, she was about to retire, when a light form bounded

over the gate of the little fence, and in the next instant, before her tottering limbs had power to second her will, Ernest Armstrong stood before her, his eager hands grasping the window-sill, and his fine countenance glowing with joy and animation.

“Gertrude, my own Gertrude,” he exclaimed passionately, “we have conquered! At last you are mine. My father has sent me before him, to prepare you for his visit. He comes to embrace his new daughter.”

The orphan gazed fixedly at him for an instant, and then fell back upon her seat speechless and powerless. She had struggled against her despair, but she had not strength to support this sudden revulsion of feeling. With the quick glance of affection, Ernest at once discovered the error of which he had been guilty in the happiness of his own heart, and in another moment he had sprung into the apartment, and was at her feet.

“What have I done, Gertrude?” he whispered tenderly; “speak to me, dearest, and assure me that the past is forgiven; that the silence which you enforced upon me has not led to a doubt of my affection; that I am welcome, even although I may have been long in coming. One word, Gertrude, only one, if you still love me.”

Gertrude strove to utter the assurance that he asked, but her pale lips trembled without regaining the force of utterance; and then it was that, surprised at her prolonged silence, the agitated young man looking more earnestly upon her, recognised the ravages which the last few weeks had made in her whole person.

The shudder which passed over his frame alone betrayed his wretchedness, but it was eloquent—for a moment he feared that he had returned *too late*—and he eagerly fastened his eyes upon her wasted features and sunken form, as if to ask himself whether indeed there were yet hope.

After a time, however, his anxious and affectionate devotion appeared to call back the fleeting senses of the orphan, and a convulsive sob announced her return to consciousness. A deep blush rose to her faded cheek as she found herself in the arms of Ernest, and her first impulse was to liberate herself; but the clasp of affection was not to be so readily flung off; and it was with increased tenderness

that Ernest appealed to her feelings, to her fidelity, and to her justice.

"You have doubted me, Gertrude," he murmured reproachfully; "you have doubted me, or I should not find you thus. I can read hours of misgiving and of reproach upon the pale brow that rests so languidly upon my shoulder. When I approached the window I saw you as radiant as ever, and little did I suspect that it was the mere cheat of a mocking light. Why have you been thus ungenerous towards me? Did you not know that when, for the first time in my life, I pleaded with my father, I was pleading for the happiness of my whole life—nay, for that very life itself? And did you indeed judge so poorly of me as to believe that I would be worsted in such a cause?"

A faint and timid smile rose to the lip of the orphan.

"Time has passed, I know it but too well," pursued Ernest, "since the cruel moment in which you banished me from your presence until I could return with my father's sanction to our marriage; and you are also quite aware that my father loves you; but, nevertheless, his ambition—his vanity—call it what you will—had led him to form other projects for his son; and you must therefore forgive him even though he should have exhibited such pertinacious reluctance in yielding to my prayer. Believe me also, dearest, when I assure you that your dignity has never been compromised even for an instant; it could not be, for that dignity was also mine. As regarded your birth, there were, of course, no scruples, for therein we were equals. You see that I am frank with you, Gertrude, for we love each other; and I feel that I have no right, as certainly I have no wish, to mislead you. The difficulty was at once less in importance, and more powerful in effect. You are as well aware as myself that the Armstrongs were, some generations ago, the most wealthy family in the county, and my father had encouraged strange visions that I was destined to restore their ancient affluence by what the world calls a fortunate marriage; but I knew too well that this was a popular misnomer, as it is commonly understood, and that my happiness must have a more solid and tangible foundation. In short, we discussed the matter until he became convinced that I had reason on my side,

and now I transgress no duty in telling you that I am all your own."

"And shall you indeed never regret so great a sacrifice, Ernest? Shall you never weary of your poor penniless bride?" asked his listener tenderly.

"Do we weary of the air we breathe, Gertrude? Are you not the one thought, the one interest of my existence? And now I have only to entreat of you to take more care of my happiness than it is evident you have done of late; for truly, dearest, you are sadly changed."

"I know it," said the pale girl, as she swept her languid hand across her brow; "I am indeed, as you remark, sadly changed; but joy is a skilful physician. You are here, and all will soon once more be well with me."

For the first time the enraptured lover ventured to touch with his lips the forehead which reposed upon his shoulder; and he did so unhidden, for the strength of the orphan was ebbing rapidly beneath the conflicting emotion of the last half hour, and the heart of the young man heaved as he watched the colour rise and fade, in rapid alternation, upon her cheek.

It was, consequently, almost with a feeling of relief that he heard the sound of approaching footsteps; and while Gertrude instinctively withdrew herself from his hold, he hastily rose from his seat and stood beside her. In the next instant Miss Warrington entered the room, and an exclamation of surprise escaped her lips as she remarked the presence of the intruder.

"I owe you a thousand apologies, my dear madam," said Ernest in reply, as he advanced towards her with extended hand; "I feel that I have been guilty of a most unceremonious entrance beneath your roof, but I trust that you will pardon the indiscretion when I tell you that I came here to claim my bride."

"Your bride, Mr. Armstrong!" echoed the bewildered old lady, as she sank almost as breathless as the orphan herself into her accustomed arm-chair; "beware, young gentleman, how you jest with a Mortimer. I am old and powerless, it is true; but Gertrude is not altogether friendless, and she must not be made the sport of idle vanity."

And as she spoke her tall figure grew yet taller, while

the fingers, generally so tightly clasped, were extended and outstretched as if in warning.

"You wrong me, Miss Warrington," was the proud reply; "I come as a suppliant, not as a jester; and I am even now momentarily awaiting the arrival of my father to second my suit. I love, and have long loved your niece, and she has condescended to return my affection; family affairs, with which I will not weary you, have detained me some time in town, and I regret to perceive that during my absence the health of Gertrude has not progressed as I had hoped. She has, however, promised me that she will exert all her energies to recover strength, and we must trust that care and zeal will aid her successfully in the effort. And now, my dear madam, do you still refuse your hand to your new nephew?"

The astonishment of the stately old lady, far from diminishing, only increased with every word to which she listened; but, as she saw the meek and appealing eyes of Gertrude fixed upon her, she almost unconsciously placed her hand in that of the young man who stood respectfully before her, and drew a long breath as though she would have heaved a heavy weight from her breast.

"You have told me nothing of this, Miss Mortimer," she at length said, in her most sententious tones, "and you have been wrong. I am your natural guardian, and could not have objected to this marriage, provided it be, as I trust it is, welcome to Mr. Armstrong's family; for otherwise I at once refuse my sanction, and cannot countenance the visits of this gentleman."

There was no opportunity for either Gertrude or her lover to reply to this solemn announcement, for the words were still upon the lips of Miss Warrington when a carriage stopped at the door, and the Squire was announced. Vainly did the poor girl endeavour to rise from her chair to receive him; the throbbing of her heart was so violent, that she could only clasp her hands together and gasp for breath; but she soon overcame this undue emotion, and pride lent her strength as Mr. Armstrong turned from the ceremonious greeting of the maiden aunt to welcome him, if not with complete composure, at least with perfect self-possession.

There was a slight, a very slight, shade of constraint

upon the brow of the Squire, which did not escape the anxious eyes of Gertrude; and, perhaps, it was fortunate that she remarked it, for it gave her nerve, conscious, as she was, that she had used no unworthy means to secure the affection of his son. He, however, seated himself beside her, after having given a nod of intelligence to Ernest, who was eagerly watching his movements; and, kindly taking her hand, expressed the regret which he felt at her altered appearance.

"We have all been in error, my dear Miss Mortimer," he pursued, although with visible effort, "and that mad boy yonder not the least. What business had he to agitate and harass you with his foolish fancies when you had no strength to spare? And what business had you to listen when you should have been thinking of your health, and endeavouring to take care of yourself? Oh! my pretty Gertrude," he whispered more affectionately, as he saw the large tears swelling in her eyes, "what business had I, old fool as I was, to suppose that I knew better what was good for him than he did himself? However, as we have all been wrong, we must all endeavour to be wiser in future. As for me, Gertrude, you must forget that I did not do justice to your merits at once, as, perhaps, I should have done, for I have had to contend against a host of old hopes and of old memories, by which I have been haunted since his boyhood."

"My dear sir," broke in the happy Gertrude, "how can I reply to such unhopèd-for indulgence? But indeed, indeed I am not unworthy of it. I have long despaired in silence, without one feeling save that of gratitude towards yourself. I did not dare to hope, but I, at least, avoided all self-reproach."

"I know it, my dear young lady, I know it," was the cordial rejoinder. "Had it been otherwise, you would not have been the little Gertrude who robbed us all of our hearts. And the more I look at you the more I feel disposed to admit that Ernest is right, and that you will, after all, bring him the best dowry."

"I am acquitted, then, in your eyes, sir?" said the young man, with a triumphant smile.

"Fully, honourably acquitted, and I receive with joy to

my heart and home the daughter you have selected for me."

And, as he spoke, the kind old Squire folded the agitated orphan in his arms, and kissed her with paternal tenderness.

"To-morrow," he pursued, after the pause of a moment, during which no one made an effort to break the silence, "to-morrow, Mrs. Armstrong and the girls will be with you early; nay, they wanted to invade the carriage to-night when they learnt my errand; but they had grumbled so much for the last few weeks at what they were pleased to call my unkindness in debarring them from the society of their favourite, that I resolved to punish them for their want of obedience; and so, in spite of all their reproaches and entreaties, I set forth alone, as the young gentleman opposite had done before me, although I suggested that we should travel in company. So you see, my pretty Gertrude, that you must put on all your best looks to receive them, or incur the risk of undergoing a course of Mrs. Armstrong's dieting and nursing, when you may pass your time more pleasantly."

"And Eleanor and Mary—do they really still love me?" asked the orphan, with emotion.

"For Eleanor I can answer at once," smiled Mr. Armstrong; "as for Mary, her love appears to be monopolised by Somerville, but I dare say that you will nevertheless be able to come to an understanding. And now I must take my leave; and so, moreover, must this young gentleman, who has agitated you more than enough already, and against whom I shall request Miss Warrington to close her doors if he does not conduct himself with becoming prudence; for, as he has insisted upon giving me a daughter, so, in my turn, I shall insist that she be taken proper care of."

Ernest would fain have expostulated, and turned an imploring look from his father to his hostess, but he met with no encouragement from either.

There was accordingly no appeal, and, with a parting word which lasted throughout a somewhat lengthy and and explanatory leave-taking between the sententious old lady and the simple-mannered Squire, Ernest was com-

pelled at last to relinquish the hand which had been confidently abandoned to him, and to follow his father to the carriage with as much philosophy as he could command; nor was it until the sound of their retreating wheels convinced her that they were indeed gone that Miss Warrington turned towards her niece with wonder and reproach alike upon her lips, but her words fell powerless on the closed ear of her companion. The reaction of feeling had consumed her small remaining amount of strength, and the orphan lay back insensible in her chair.

With eager but mistaken zeal Miss Warrington and her handmaiden hastened to arouse the exhausted girl from the perfect repose of mind and body induced by the syncope into which she had fallen, and to convey her to her chamber, where, at her earnest request, they left her to reflect upon all the unhoped-for events of the last few hours. And very strange, almost too strange, for sober self-gratulation appeared the total change which had supervened in all her feelings. Again and again she asked herself if it indeed were true—if it were not merely a cheat of her wandering reason? But again and again she was enabled to recal every word and almost every look; she seemed still to feel the pressure of the old man's lips upon her cheek, and the warm clasp of the hand which had so long been closed over her own, and she smiled the heart's smile as every succeeding moment strengthened her consciousness of the truth.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SYBIL and Mortimer were man and wife, and they were travelling over that glorious Italy which they both loved so well, and were so well able to appreciate. More beautiful than ever in the eyes of her enraptured bridegroom, Mrs. Mortimer was radiant with smiles, bright with genius, and affectionate even beyond his hope. Surrounded by all the appliances of luxury, she had scarcely time to form a wish ere it was eagerly fulfilled; her days were all sunshine and her heart all triumph.

At length they reached Rome, and here they had

decided to spend a long and delicious month among the old and glorious memories of the past. No prospect could be more enchanting to Frederic; possessed of his long-coveted bride, and existing in the land of his predilection, he had not a desire unfulfilled; but Sybil soon became less enthusiastic than himself, and there was an evident restlessness in her manner each morning as they set forth to visit the memorable monuments of the Imperial City.

One of her constant cares since leaving England had been to examine the visitors' book of every hotel at which they took up their temporary abode; and, although Frederic found an equal amusement in the heterogeneous assemblage of autographs thus placed under his eyes, yet, as he sat with his arm folded about the slight figure of his wife, his glance following the direction of her finger, and laughed with her at the pompous announcements attached to the plebeian names of Tomkins, Jenkins, Smith, *è tutti quanti*, it was nevertheless evident that Sybil attached a serious interest to the survey, in which he was far from participating. A sigh of relief escaped her as she closed the dingy volume, upon each occasion until that upon which we shall rejoin her.

Rome was crowded with foreigners, and it was not without considerable difficulty that Mortimer succeeded in securing for Sybil such accommodation as he considered worthy of her.

The hotel book was full of names, on which the ink had as yet had scarcely time to dry. Highnesses, duchesses, peers, and chevaliers of every order under the sun were intermingled in sublime confusion with city knights, touring-traders, and chevaliers d'industrie. It was evident that not a hope of even partial seclusion remained for the married lovers. The finger of Sybil had already indicated her acquaintance with at least a dozen of the new arrivals, while Frederic himself had discovered more than one name which was full of old associations. As yet, however, neither had been sufficiently discouraged to utter more than an impatient "pshaw!" at each encounter, until the somewhat cramped and hyper-flourished signature of the Prince de Saviatti caused an involuntary start on the part of the lady, which brought a bright flush into her cheek.

"You know *il illustrissimo Principe*, Sybil?" said Mortimer, who had observed her emotion.

"Yes," was the somewhat embarrassed reply, "in so far as such an individual really can be known. I met him frequently during a season in town, when, as he expressed it, he was 'doing his England;' and I confess that I am surprised to find him here, when I believed that he was in Egypt or China, or at the antipodes, *pour promener sa paresse*, for he is full of Sicilian prejudices, and always laughed at my enthusiasm for Rome and its treasures."

"He is evidently no favourite of yours," remarked her husband, who had detected an unusual tinge of bitterness in her tone.

Sybil attempted a contemptuous laugh. "I have had few favourites," she said, as she passed her small and jewelled hand through the clustering curls of her companion; a liberty which he resented by drawing her to his bosom, and thus affording her the opportunity she sought of recovering her self-possession; "and poor Saviatti is sufficiently well satisfied with himself to be able to dispense with all extraneous adoration, but I confess that for a time he amused me. You know, Frederic, that all depends upon the mood of the moment, and that the antics of the monkey sometimes interest as much as the stateliness of the lion; and thus Saviatti, all prince though he be, or at least calls himself, was my monkey during three months, after which I totally lost sight of him."

Mortimer was silent. It was not that one suspicion of Sybil's truth rushed across his mind; but as yet that past, into which he so ardently desired to penetrate, remained a mystery to him.

Now, for the first time, he remembered that he had made no progress in her confidence, and that he was indebted to chance for every revelation connected with her early life. Nor had he felt altogether convinced by the explanation which he had extorted; for he could not conceal from himself that it was overstrained, and that its flippancy but ill disguised its hollowness.

It was, therefore, under the influence of a sensation as painful as it was novel to him, that he replied somewhat sarcastically, "In that case the meeting is a fortunate one; for the monkey-prince will afford a diverting relief after

our solemn musings among mouldering ruins and crumbling monuments. We shall, doubtlessly, soon meet, as we are domesticated under the same roof; and thus an acquaintance so gaily commenced may be as cheerfully continued."

"I care little ever to meet him again," said Sybil, dropping her beautiful head upon the shoulder of her husband, and looking up at him with one of those beaming smiles which always captivated his reason; "every folly has its day, and becomes stale by repetition. Saviatti is too frivolous to leave one regret behind him."

"Did he visit England alone?" asked Frederic, already half appeased, as he bent down and kissed the fair forehead which was pillowed upon his bosom; "was the monkey unaccompanied by his attendant bear?"

"Oh no! there was a tall, lean, sour-visaged abbate, who was in his train when he arrived in town; but I believe that the prince wearied of the *espionage* to which he was condemned by the companionship of this saturnine individual, who had been attached to his person by his father, and so gave him his dismissal; for it is certain that he returned to Palermo only a few weeks after the advent of his principal. But you appear singularly interested about this frivolous foreigner, Frederic!"

"Do you wonder that it should be so, Sybil? Did he not know you, and apparently know you intimately, long before we had even met?"

Mrs. Mortimer changed her position; her cheek burnt, and she did not care to expose it to the observation of her husband.

"And do you believe that he, and such as he, could *ever* know me?" she asked with a pretty affectation of scorn. "Do both yourself and me better justice, my dear Frederic. Saviatti knows me as he knows Rome; he appreciates me as he appreciates the glories of the Parthenon and the sublimity of St. Peter's. And, *à propos* of this, what shall we do this evening? Surely we came to the Imperial City for a better purpose than that of 'chronicling small beer?'"

"Shall we visit the Coliseum?"

"*Il Coliseo*? Oh no! Have you forgotten that the moon is at the full, and that it will swarm with fools? Let us go there when it can be, if not entirely, at least compara-

tively, our own. I loathe to witness the tricks of the travelled mountebank, upon the very spot where once gushed forth the proud blood from the panting arteries of the stricken gladiator, or the holy lifetide of the Christian captive. Do not even let us attempt the Villa Medici; we shall be elbowed by foreign Excellencies and crimson-stockinged Eminences; nor will that, in all probability, be the worst. Remember the list of names over which we have been pondering; and dread the encounter of this flight of northern locusts as you would the malaria of the Campagna."

"Whither *can* we go, then, to avoid them?" asked Frederic, once more appeased by the belief that all society had become importunate to Sybil which deprived her of his own.

"Have you ever visited the gardens of the Negroni?"

"Never."

"Will you devote your evening to me alone, without regret and without *ennui*."

"Not my evening only, but my whole existence!" replied Frederic tenderly.

Sybil laughingly placed her hand upon his lips. "Wait until we are wandering in the delicious solitudes to which I am about to introduce you," she said, "before you forget the husband in the lover. *There*, indeed, you will, or I greatly mistake you, be compelled to yield to the soft influence of the spot, about which we shall, in all probability, be permitted to ramble alone, as it has few attractions for the mere tourist, who seeks to see rather than to feel."

"What a delicious prospect! And when shall we set forth?"

"Now, if you will. The sun is near its decline, and the hour is most propitious."

And as Sybil spoke she passed to an inner apartment, whence she emerged a few moments afterwards, shawled and bonneted; and moreover, for the first time since her marriage, closely veiled. There was little fear that a man of pleasure like Saviatti would be found in the solitary recesses of the Negroni Gardens; but even the risk, slight as it was, must be provided against; and congratulating herself upon her expedient for rendering "assurance doubly sure," Mrs. Mortimer, as she hung gracefully upon the

arm of her husband, and heard him thank her again and again for so delightful a suggestion, smiled half in triumph and half in scorn. The evening would now pass away without any encounter with the Prince ; and she must trust to her tact to urge their early departure by every means in her power. She had ere this read her weak but devoted husband even to the heart's core ; and she well knew that his vanity was the lever by which she could at all times move him at her will.

Long before they reached the silent and shadowy gardens, and even while she listened, apparently rapt in interested attention, to some old travelling memory with which Mortimer was endeavouring to beguile the way, her whole plan was arranged, and she felt secure of its success.

To her it would be no sacrifice to abandon Rome if she also escaped Saviatti. She had been warned in time of his presence : and she resolved to profit by the knowledge.

"We must leave Rome, and that speedily," she murmured to herself, as, with an exclamation of delight from Mortimer, they plunged into the thickest shades of the perfumed solitude, which to him promised an evening of intense and quiet happiness, and to her a few hours of insipidity and safety !

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FAIR and gracious reader, have you ever visited the Negroni Gardens at Rome ? If not, be careful to bend your steps thitherward when you again find yourself a denizen of the lordly city, if you be one who loves that fantastic blending of the natural and the artistic, the present and the past, which speaks to the heart as well as to the senses ; and affords a calm and soothing relief from the perpetual stir and excitement of the busy world by which you are surrounded.

It is rare that even the cry of a passing bird disturbs the silence of these dreamy retreats ; but there is a constant and mysterious voice among the leaves, as they heave or quiver to the passing wind ; and a perpetual murmur of

falling waters, trickling from the porphyry basins which they overflow, and stealing away beneath a network of rank grass and aquatic weeds by which their onward course is totally concealed. When the eye wanders upwards, and penetrates between the sturdy boughs of the ancient wood, it sees, shadowed upon the dense purple sky of evening, the massive domes, and tall, singularly shaped tower of Santa Maria Maggiore; the worship of art is without those hoary walls, the worship of nature is within; for how much is there of holiness in such a scene, how much to exalt the soul, and to rebuke the pride!

For a while Sybil and Mortimer walked forward in silence. Both were too full of their own sensations to break the stillness by a word. To Frederic the whole wilderness was one of enchantment; his heart throbbed, and he pressed more closely to his side the hand which rested on his arm, without even remarking that the mute caress was not returned. The spirit of the spot was within him, and about him. Keenly alive to the grand and solemn in nature, he was absorbed by that rare and beautiful feeling of universal love which comes like a holy dream upon the heart only at those infrequent moments when every hope appears to be realised, and when it makes of its happiness one common crucible in which to blend and to purify every thing around it.

Thus then, at the moment described, his heart and his aspirations were alike satisfied. He had won the woman whom he loved; and, despite those passing shadows of misgiving which are the ordinary concomitants of strong and exacting passion, he nevertheless did not entertain a doubt that, on his part, he was equally beloved. Sybil was at his side, they trod together a path of silence and enchantment, and Mortimer was supremely happy.

And where had the thoughts of Sybil wandered? Were they with the husband upon whose arm she leant? Were they with the mother from whom she was for the first time separated?—or did they linger upon that home of which she was so soon to become the presiding genius, and on those duties which would hereafter devolve upon her? In sooth, they were occupied by none of these. As they turned from one avenue into another, a hasty glance first assured her that their solitude still continued uninvaded,

and that her reflections fell back to the point at which they had momentarily paused.

For months Rome had been the object of all her wishes, as well as those of Mortimer; but from Rome she now felt that it was expedient they should depart at once, and the pretext for this apparent caprice was readily found. Yet, to return to Westrum—to bury herself in an obscure English county, of whose monotony she had already had dreary experience, now that her point was carried, and that the world was once more before her—revolted alike her vanity and her patience. And for whom was she required to do this? For a man whose supineness she despised, whose intellect she scorned, and of whose feelings she was careless. Sybil at once convinced herself that such a sacrifice was impossible.

It was upon speculations such as these that her thoughts were engaged, amidst the solemn shades threaded by Mortimer with tender veneration; nor was her reverie disturbed by a single word until they reached a spot so striking and picturesque, as to rouse even her companion from his trance of delight. They had traversed one of the cypress avenues from end to end; and then, striking into a lateral walk, fragrant with untended lemon-trees and vagrant honeysuckle, sheltered on its northern side by a thick belt of bay, and rendered fresh and verdant upon its other lip by one of those hidden rivulets of water already described, they suddenly came upon a small open space, in the centre of which stood an altar, moss-grown and hoary, where an eternal requiem was supplied by the overflowing of a capacious basin that was half veiled by the surrounding underwood, and the flexile leaves which trembled, as if in adoration, to the touch of the passing breeze.

“Beautiful!” exclaimed Frederic, as he suddenly paused, and claimed the attention of his musing bride. “Where can we find a better halting-place? Here, Sybil, the world, and the world’s follies, are indeed as nothing; and we may be all in all to each other.”

“It is, indeed, a lovely retreat,” said Sybil, as she suffered herself to be established beside the brimming basin, whence the crystal waters escaped with a low murmur which lent a mystic voice to the solitude; “to be happy here, the spirit need only be at peace.”

"Let us, then, be happy," retorted the still enamoured husband, as he flung himself beside her, and supported her slight figure with his encircling arm, "for are we, at least, not at peace? Are we not well able to appreciate all its charm? I love you in the world, Sybil; in the crowd, where my protection and my support are necessary to your more delicate nature; but in such a scene as this, how doubly dear do you appear to me, where you are all my own, and we are alone with the sublime works of nature!"

"Would that we could be ever thus, my best friend!" replied Sybil, with one of her most radiant smiles; "but alas! that is impossible. We owe ourselves to the world, which is a stern task-mistress, and will enforce their duties upon all her children. Even now, since we entered these gardens, I feel overwhelmed by a sense of my own individual responsibility; I have become convinced that the path before me must not be perpetually strewn with roses. And when I think of you, Frederic; of you, with all your glorious faculties, and manifold opportunities of good, I become almost sad with anxiety. You know how I love you; for have I not given myself to you, despite the resolution of years, and the dictates which I had so long accustomed myself to regard as those of a calm and matured reason? And yet, I confess that I would also feel myself compelled to regard you with pride as well as affection; I would see you just to yourself; not shunning the world as an object either of scorn or alarm, but boldly taking your place among the foremost of those by whom its destinies are controlled."

"Sybil, you astonish me! What can I need more than I possess?—what can the world of which you speak add to my present happiness? Have I not wealth sufficient to ensure to you—and that alone can now be my consideration—all the luxuries of life? Is not my social station unexceptionable? What have I now to do with ambition? My race of hope is run."

"Are you then content to die and be forgotten?"

"Not by those who love me. Not by such as you, Sybil; but I care little for the memory of the world. Rear for me an imperishable altar in your own heart, and I shall ask no worship which would entail a more conspicuous shrine."

"Let us, then, talk of life rather than death," said Sybil, with a sigh, for which Mortimer felt grateful to her. "You are still too young to immure yourself in a country-house, limiting your duties to receiving rents and entertaining provincial parsons. Neither your tastes nor your acquirements fit you for occupations like these; and I confess that I cannot see you reconcile yourself thus to fritter away your years and your faculties without remorse and regret: remorse that my society may induce you to bear with such a fate; and regret that you should not have chosen a nobler destiny."

"And how can I dispel such bitter feelings?" asked her bridegroom, playfully. "Shall I volunteer myself as prime minister, or try my fortune as commander-in-chief? Nevertheless," he added, more gravely, "you surprise me greatly, Sybil; for we have so frequently and so fondly talked together of the delights of a tranquil home, and the happiness of making that home the centre of benevolence and love, that I was unprepared for this change of sentiment in one by whom I believed that my thoughtful and somewhat indolent nature was thoroughly understood."

"Nor must you now misconceive me, Frederic," replied Sybil, somewhat anxiously; "before I became your wife I thought only, I dreamt only of securing your affection, of having you constantly beside me, and of engrossing all the faculties of your soul; but now that I know you better and prize you more; now that egotism has become less prominent, and that I live in you rather than in myself, I have learnt to be jealous of your future destiny. I desire that others should understand and appreciate you as I do—that they should be compelled to acknowledge that you were never born to live and die a mere country gentleman, vegetating with your crops, and confining alike your ambition and your patriotism to the due payment of your taxes, and an annual speech at the county dinner."

"What a malicious picture, Sybil!"

"Is it not correct in every feature? And, meanwhile, who are you permitting to outstrip you in the race of life? I will not speak of the great master-spirits of the age; let them wear with honour the laurels that they have so nobly won; but look at the herd of mere empty imitators, who make a reputation by the simple mimicry of their great

models, as certain blocks of stone owe a voice to the sounds they do but echo. Are these, and such as these, crippled alike in means, in station, and in acquirements, to bear away the palm of the world's praise, while you look on supinely? Believe me, Frederic, you are destined to higher fortunes than those bequeathed to you by your ancestors."

"You are an enthusiast, Sybil, and because you love me you imagine that I am equal to any emergency; but you forget that the very nature of my education has altogether unfitted me for the strife and struggle of the world. Home-usefulness has been the only aim and end of *my* ambition. I have tenantry and dependants to whom I owe all the exertion of which I am capable."

"Say, rather, which you are disposed to make," replied his fair wife, somewhat impatiently; "but you should rouse yourself, Frederic, from so unseemly a state of moral lethargy. Your local duties are sacred only to a certain point; nor can they entail the necessity of self-sacrifice. You owe your present position to the energy and prudence of your ancestors; and, as yet, you have done nothing for yourself."

"What would you have me to do? My habits are formed. I am no longer young enough to brook control, nor am I so necessitous as to render it endurable."

Sybil laughed. "One would imagine," she said, playfully—for, by the inflexion of her husband's voice she was at once aware that he was displeased by her pertinacity—"one would really imagine, my dear Frederic, that I proposed to induce you to enter into a merchant's office, or to purchase an ensign's commission. Is there not such a career as diplomacy, for instance, where at once you might avail yourself of your natural talents, and of your knowledge of continental habits and policy?—a career of which, possessed of such advantages as yours, it is impossible to prophesy the termination?"

"And our home, Sybil?"

"Our home will be rendered prouder and happier by the distinction of its owner."

"But I have no influence with the Government, even were I to permit myself to indulge in such a vision."

"You have money; and a golden key unlocks every door in our dear treasure-worshipping England."

Frederic sighed as he glanced around him. How little had he anticipated such a discussion in that delicious solitude! For months had he talked with Sybil of the tranquil happiness of that ancestral home which she now so strenuously urged him to abandon. And yet he was rather pained than angry. If she did indeed wish him to make so vast a sacrifice, was it not her love for him, her pride in him, which led her to forget that she was also, should she succeed in inspiring him with her views, sacrificing herself?

It was consequently with a sad smile that he pursued the subject, by reminding her that such an undertaking was beset with difficulties; that their comfort, their affection, and their peace of mind would be perilled for an uncertain result; while, even should all end favourably, they could never again be all in all to each other.

Sybil, however, had counter-arguments to advance, which, even if they were not conclusive, were at least flattering and plausible; but still Mortimer hesitated to pledge himself to a line of conduct so repugnant to his tastes.

"Enough of this for to-day, dearest," he said, as he pressed to his lips the small hand which had remained clasped in his own throughout their dialogue; "let us not further darken the present by anxiety for the future. Are we not in Rome, Sybil? And is it not profanation thus to wander away in thought from the glories by which we are surrounded?"

"You will think me very capricious, my own Frederic," said his wife, tenderly, "when I tell you that I already weary to return to England. I know by your start that you are surprised; but you must forgive me when I confess that not even your affection can make me forget a thousand anxieties—my mother, alone for the first time—the unsettled state of my unfortunately involved affairs. Do you know that I absolutely shudder when I reflect upon all the trouble and annoyance which await you on my account, and shall have no real peace until all is arranged?"

"Leave Rome!" exclaimed Frederic, painfully impressed he knew not wherefore, by this sudden whim.

"I knew that you would be astonished, dear love," said Sybil, with well-acted humility, "but you must recollect that, however you may have exalted me in your own affec-

tionate imagination, I am only a woman, after all ; and then, remember that we can return whenever we wish to do so ; and that, with a heart at ease, I shall be so much better able to give myself up to all the delights of such a sojourn."

"I am sure that I cannot be mistaken," exclaimed a voice which appeared to rise out of the ground immediately beside them, as a figure emerged from behind a tangled mass of bay-trees and advanced rapidly towards the spot where they were seated, "I am quite sure that I see, or that, at least, I hear Miss Delamere."

The words were English, but the accent in which they were uttered was decidedly foreign ; and the change of position necessitated by so abrupt an apparition enabled Sybil to conceal from her husband the emotion which they had elicited, as, extending her hand, she answered, with wonderful self-command, "Your ear has not deceived you, Prince ; and we are, indeed, fated to meet again at Rome."

"No matter where," was the reply, as the speaker clasped the offered hand, and then threw himself upon the grass beside her, "no matter where, so that, as you say, we meet again. Are you long from England?"

"About two months : and you?"

"Oh, I? I really scarcely know—I hardly recollect—I remember nothing since we parted ; since you——"

"Prince," interposed Mrs. Mortimer, hastily, "allow me to present to you—my husband."

"*Corpo di Bacco!*" ejaculated the intruder, as if unconsciously ; but in the next instant he recovered himself, and, with considerable dignity, replied with a low bow, "I am honoured. Sir, I congratulate you ; I understand all now, and ask that you will forgive my indiscretion."

Mortimer bowed in his turn.

"The Prince Saviatti, my dear Frederic, of whom I have spoken to you," said Sybil, with one of her sweetest smiles.

"Ha! Madame has spoken of me," pursued the foreigner, "I am, it is impossible to be more, flattered. We are, then, old acquaintance. Do you stay long in Rome, sir?"

"We are as yet undecided," replied the young husband,

irritated he knew not wherefore by the cool and self-satisfied manner of the intruder.

"Oh, then, I shall have the honour to decide you," was the rejoinder. "Madame and I are such old and good friends, and we have so much to talk over, and we shall be so glad to come together again in this charming manner. I know this old Rome of ours now, *de bout en blanc*, and I shall have the happiness to be your *cicerone*, and to be always beside you."

Mortimer involuntarily shrank back; the easy hyper-courtesy of his new acquaintance revolted his English reserve.

"We have here many of your old acquaintance, Mademoiselle—*c'est-à-dire*, Madame"—resumed the Prince. "And ha!—it is a sad pity, but you have just come one little day too late to see Trevor. He went yesterday—he would go yesterday; I could not stop him. He is like you; he forgets old times; and he goes home to your foggy England to fetch his wife."

"His wife!"

"Yes, yes; he is determined at last to play the *pastor fido*. Poor Trevor! he makes a grand mistake—don't you see it as I do? But he had so little choice. He was pretty near what you call in London 'cleared out;' couldn't get on, you know, and so—married."

"Will you never reform?" asked Sybil, with affected playfulness.

"I must," was the prompt reply, "since you and Trevor have presented me with so charming an example—so encouraging a model. Perhaps I may even marry myself—when there is no other hope left for me."

"You are ungallant, Prince," said Mrs. Mortimer, resolutely concealing her annoyance.

"Not at all; for I cannot hope to find a second Miss Delamere. See now—I find you here alone with Monsieur —," he paused for an instant; but, as Sybil did not pronounce the name of her husband, which he had evidently awaited, he pursued in the same tone, "absolutely alone in this solitude, while other married pairs are congregated in the Coliseo, or the Parthenon, or St. Peter's. Is it not enough to make me despair? I always suspect the couples

who are so anxious to *afficher leur bonheur*; while you disarm me by your evident desire to escape the crowd. Monsieur is too happy. Who will not envy him his triumph!"

Mortimer writhed beneath a familiarity which he felt to be almost insolent. It was not thus that he had approached Sybil—that he had won her. He could not brook that she should be subjected to what he considered as an affront to her dignity; and he was about to make some caustic remark, when he was interrupted by the Prince, who, as he reclined upon the ground almost at the feet of his fair friend, languidly striking a costly cane mounted with gems against his polished boot, asked carelessly—

"And how long do you stay in Rome, madame? I am here for the next three months, and—always with the permission of Monsieur—I shall ask you to do the same. You will be well amused. We shall have plenty to occupy us in the present; and we have so much to talk over, and—who knows?—to remedy in the past."

"We leave the day after to-morrow," said Sybil resolutely.

"Tyrant!" laughed the Prince; "you want to be persuaded—entreated——"

"I do not always yield either to persuasion or entreaty;" and the tone of Mrs. Mortimer grew still more cold and repelling.

"True—not always," conceded M. Saviatti with undiminished composure; "but sometimes—you will not deny that sometimes you are not inexorable. See—I am at your feet—and I pray you to retract your threat."

"Our plans are decided."

"Bah!" ejaculated the Prince sarcastically; "Monsieur, married since two or three months, must be accustomed to see you change your mind. I have not, unhappily, the right to ask that you should once more do so at my request, but the tastes of your sex are so variable that I may at least hope. Why should *you*, madame?" and there was a shade of mockery in his tone as he proceeded; "why should *you* desire to stand alone, and to declare your will immutable? Do you hope that, knowing all your other perfections, any one will consent

to believe so enormous a solecism? No, no; when I have the honour to meet you to-morrow, you will say to me frankly, 'Prince, I have repented my idle resolution, and I am for three months in Rome.'"

"I attach no faith to your prophecy."

"We shall see."

Mortimer had with difficulty restrained his indignation, but the last impertinent rejoinder of Saviatti was more than he could support; and, suddenly springing up, he extended his hand to assist his wife, as he said with affected calmness—

"Sybil, the air is becoming damp. I cannot allow you to remain longer exposed to its influence. Prince, I have the honour to wish you a good evening."

"Not at all, monsieur—not at all," said the pertinaacious foreigner; "Madame and I are old friends; I will accompany you"—and, rising in his turn, he prepared to put his purpose into execution.

"You will excuse me," said Mortimer, suddenly stopping short, and forcing his words through his clenched teeth; "I am this lady's husband; for my sake she has been good enough to forget, or at least to resign, all past friendships; and, as you and I are total strangers, you will do me a favour by permitting us to return alone."

"Oh, monsieur, by all means—by all means in the world," replied the Prince, with an affectation of ceremonious courtesy which became a sarcasm from its excess. "I owe you ten thousand apologies; and I know so well the value of Madame's society, that I am conscious, very conscious, of my error. I have the honour to salute you both, and to make you my sincere compliments on your marriage;" and so saying, Saviatti raised his hat, bowed profoundly, and moved forward with a brisk step, humming as he went one of the popular airs of the day.

"Sybil," demanded Mortimer sternly, when they were once more alone, "what is the meaning of what has just passed?"

"The meaning!" replied his wife with an impatient shrug of the shoulders; "the meaning simply is, that you have been 'sprited by a fool; sprited and angered worse;' and that, by your want of self-command, you have made us the proverb of Rome."

"Be it so," said Mortimer; "a few hours will suffice for us to leave the ridicule behind. We will abide by your decision, and return at once to England."

"You are strangely discomposed, Frederic."

"I do not wish to conceal it. Oh, Sybil!" he continued vehemently, "did you know, could you imagine, the proud confidence with which I have always looked upon you—were you able to estimate the resolute scorn with which I have flung from me every suspicion of that past which you so pertinaciously conceal—the absorbing affection which I have poured out at your feet—you would comprehend what I have suffered during the last hour."

"Am I to understand that you are weak enough to be jealous, Frederic?"

"Perhaps so—but that is not all. I tremble to perceive that my faith in you is shaken; that I am under the influence of some inexplicable misgiving—that, in short, I shall never again feel safe in your affection until you lay the whole past before me, frankly and confidently."

"Frederic—Mr. Mortimer," exclaimed Sybil indignantly, as she turned her flashing eyes full upon him, "am I to be made the sacrifice, because an idle babbler sees fit to vent his inanities upon me? Had I not already told you that I knew this man? That he was an empty coxcomb, living only for himself, and making his rank an excuse for his absurdities? Would it have been more delicate, more honourable in me to have betrayed his secret, as you now compel me to do, and to have met your questioning with the reply that he had loved me? Let it suffice that you are now in possession of this mighty secret, and that the rejected suitor will not fail to amuse all Rome before noon to-morrow, at the expense of the jealous husband."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE reader must now follow us to a vast and magnificent apartment, of such extent that the dark walls—whereon a series of ancient family portraits panelled into the woodwork, and encircled by a faded gold moulding, too much time-worn to reflect the light—were left in deep shadow; although, in the centre of the marble floor, a somewhat capacious table bore a cluster of wax tapers, which shed their brilliancy over a number of crystal goblets, tall-necked bottles, and a small tray containing dishes of olives, prepared caviare, salted sardines, and other provocatives of thirst. On either side of the table were ranged rows of chairs, against one of which rested a long, slender, Turkish *chibouque* of jasmin-wood, with a superb mouthpiece of amber, encircled by a large turquoise. Near another stood a magnificent oriental *narghilè*; its ample vase of elaborately-cut glass already filled with the scented waters, through which the coarser aroma of the Virginian weed was destined to pass before it reached the lips of the smoker; and its long, pliable tube of leather, bound with crimson and silver threads, coiled like a glittering snake upon the table above. A couple of boxes of cedar-wood, inscribed with certain letters and figures, which doubtlessly certified as to the genuineness of their contents, were still hermetically closed; but, from their form and fashion, it was easy to discover that they also were filled with tobacco in that more symmetrical and minute shape which has lately obtained so much in European taste; while, scattered here and there among the sparkling wines and goblets of Venice-glass, were cards and dice, and other necessary appliances of the gambler's craft.

In short, all around announced the necessary preparation for one of those midnight orgies in which the idle and the *désœuvré* are accustomed to cheat their *ennui*, to waste their health, and to consume their substance. And it was strange, and even sad, to glance round that stately room, with its angles gradually disappearing in the darkness, its

grim warriors and frowning senators looking down as if in cold and silent scorn, from their gloomy eminence, and the huge mirror festing upon the high wide mantel of parti-coloured marble, and dimly reflecting in the distance the deep glow of the clustered lights; and to see it profaned by such occupation! It seemed like a bitter satire silently pronounced by past splendour upon modern folly.

The silence was, however, of short duration; for, as though they had only awaited the completion of these preliminary arrangements, groups of young and fashionably-dressed men ere long began to arrive, until every seat, save one, was filled—that which was marked by the position of the *narghilè*; and servants in rich but varied liveries began to busy themselves in opening the cedar boxes, and pouring out the rich wines which were dispersed over the table.

Every European nation seemed to have supplied its representative to that nocturnal revel. On one side the deep flashing eyes, and raven hair, and *bistre* complexion of the Spaniard were contrasted with the pale cheek and sandy locks of the Norwegian; on another the once fresh, but now somewhat faded, complexion and calm hazel eyes of the Englishman formed a marked and characteristic contrast to the dull skin and restless physiognomy of the Frenchman; the Greek, with his finely-articulated features and mobile expression, was thrown into violent contact with the impassible and moody gravity of the Turk; and the volatile and gesticulating Italian had taken his place beside the polished but wary Russian. It was, in sooth, a gathering together of the nations, thus individually assembled for one common worship—for one simultaneous bowing down before the Baal of dissipation and excess. For a time nothing was heard save the questions and rejoinders necessitated by the nature of the meeting; but, ere long, everything being arranged to the satisfaction of the revellers, the domestics gradually withdrew, and the business of the evening commenced.

In one direction a couple of gamesters, too indolent or too impatient to trust their fortunes to the slower process of the cards, were hazarding large sums upon a single throw of the dice; in another, a party were collected round a roulette-table, established in an angle of the apart-

ment, which had just been lighted up ; at the principal table sundry of the guests had paired off at *écarté*, while others stood by and made heavy bets upon the game.

High play was, indeed, progressing throughout the apartment ; and among the most eager of the gamblers were the Russian prince, the German baron, and the Hungarian count, who had established themselves at the roulette-table. Piles of gold were heaped up and swept away as if by enchantment ; and long before day-dawn the German had flung his watch and signet-ring upon the fatal baize, the Russian his diamond star in pledge for a hundred roubles, and the Hungarian the jewelled clasps of his sable-lined pelisse. Less excitable at games of chance than their foreign visitors, the Romans were masters of the field.

And at intervals, even amid that high-born and high-bred assemblage, bitter oaths were vented, and peals of hideous laughter—the laughter of mingled mortification and rage—awakened the dull echoes of the spacious room ; deep draughts were drained, and snatches of licentious song added ribaldry to vice.

Yet still the play went on. Why should it pause ? When its votaries had exhausted their gold, they had still their honour to trade upon ; and so, small strips of paper, ready prepared upon a consol of black marble, supported by gilded Cupids linked together by garlands of roses, were passed from hand to hand ; and the cards were cut, and the dice were thrown, as eagerly, if not quite as gaily, as when the solid metal had been showered down in streams.

From time to time the vapour of brandy rose upon the heated atmosphere, and the unsteady hand by which it was poured betrayed the evil fortunes of the reveller, for whom the more generous and less enervating wine had lost its spell. And throughout all this turmoil, all this toil, and all this excitement, the placid duke and the reckless lordling still played on, almost in silence.

Meanwhile, Saviatti had arrived ; but the engrossing occupation of those around him had only enabled them to greet his entrance by a gesture or a glance ; while, apparently, satisfied with this somewhat equivocal welcome, the Palermitan quietly took possession of his chair, ignited his

narghilè, carefully placed a minute and gilded pill of opium upon the surface of the tobacco, and smoked on in silence, absorbed in his own thoughts.

Another hour went by; and a bright streak of light intruded itself between the damask draperies which veiled one of the high casements, announcing that another day had dawned. Symptoms of weariness began to betray themselves in some of the losing gamesters, and gradually a group collected round the principal table, and began to revenge themselves by excess of another description upon the evil freaks of fortune.

"*Testa di Venus!*" exclaimed a bright-eyed Roman; "*Ecco Saviatti*. Prince, I pledge you in a goblet of Salernian. I did not see you enter. You must have arrived just as——"

"You were about to make your fortune on the red when the black was turned," said the Palermitan, quietly. "You are a perfect victim this year, *amico mio*."

"At cards, perhaps," was the self-satisfied retort; "in other respects, I have no right to complain."

"No, no; we all know that the fates favour you elsewhere. But how prospers your pursuit of the *Altessa*?"

The Roman smiled conceitedly, swept away his clustering black curls from a forehead which might have become a hero, and threw himself back negligently in his chair.

"Bah, bah! Colonna is affecting discretion," said a French count who was at his elbow.

"Nothing is more *mauvais ton, mon cher*; nothing is more *gentil berger*. Either you have failed—in which case you are right to keep your own secret—or you must travel a year or two longer, and learn to estimate the reputation of a *femme galante* at its proper price."

"Talking of women," broke in Saviatti with a half yawn, as he withdrew the ivory mouth-piece of his *narghilè* from his lips, and slowly swayed the flexible tube to and fro between his fingers; "women and discretion, be it rightly understood—I had a most amusing encounter this evening; and, but for two untoward circumstances, I might have been as happy as Colonna implies to be."

"And what were they?" asked half-a-dozen voices.

"In the first place," said the Palermitan, in the same

semi-tragic accent in which he had made his announcement ; “ in the first place, my dear friends, a jealous husband——,”

“ *Eh, que disgracia !* ”

“ In the next, a sudden determination to leave Rome ; or rather, to leave me.”

“ To leave *you* ! Impossible ! ”

“ Impossible, perhaps ; but nevertheless a fact. And in order to show you that I am too generous to follow a bad example—Colonna, pass me the champagne—I will drink the lady’s health, and tell you her history.”

“ Brava ! brava ! ” was the general chorus.

Saviatti filled his glass with the sparkling fluid, and drank it off ; then, glancing round the table upon his listeners, he said quietly, “ You all remember the English Trevor ? ”

“ All, all ! ”

“ Well, then, you are also aware that I first arrived in Rome in Trevor’s company ; but you are one and all ignorant of the fact, that before quitting England he was an engaged man. The lady was beautiful—is beautiful—your Altessa, *il mio caro* Colonna, is a Swiss beside her ; and your duchessa, *mon cher*, De Tremblay, a grisette. Trevor, in the pride of his heart, presented me to his *fiancée* ; and I, as I need scarcely tell you, was civil to her for his sake. Never did I see a man of his indolent and languid temperament more inconveniently in love with his future wife.

“ After a career of recklessness, the father of *la bella* died insolvent ; but that fact did not affect the passion of Trevor ; he was really fatiguing in his assiduities, and I almost began to forgive the lady when I imagined that she thought so as well as myself, until at length I heard her name bandied rather freely at the clubs, and coupled in no very mysterious manner with those of two or three of Trevor’s constant associates.

“ As for me, I knew from the first that she was the betrothed wife of my friend ; and, moreover, beautiful as she was, I had seen another whom I thought fairer ; consequently I felt quite at liberty to enact the Damon to my Pythias, and took upon me to hint to *il fanatico per l’amore* that he was duped. Perhaps you fancy that he

was grateful to me for this modern act of chivalry? You deceive yourselves. He was furious, *mei amici*, furious. He believed what I told him, as a matter of course, for I had pledged my honour to every statement that I made; but he shrank at the idea that the rumours had any foundation, save in the censorious imaginations of those who had propagated the scandal; and so, despite all that I could urge, he still loved on. I felt that something desperate must be done, for his malady was beyond a common cure, and accordingly I resolved to offer him an opportunity of testing the lady's truth in so unequivocal a manner that he should no longer retain a doubt as to his true position.

"After a thousand scruples he at length consented to undergo the ordeal, and as I had more than once suspected that the beautiful Miss Delamere was far from appreciating at its full value the very ceremonious courtesy with which I had studiously treated her, and had ambition enough to feel flattered by the prospect of becoming *la signora principessa*, for you all know the *faible* of ladies of her nation for the *prestige* of a high-sounding name, I determined to see whether I could not, in my own person, prove to the misguided lover that he was fooled."

"*Bravissimo, Savatelli!*" shouted his now more than half-intoxicated listeners.

"I began, then, to pay my court to the flattered beauty assiduously, but cautiously. I became silent and depressed, and she soon discovered that she alone had power to arouse me from my moral lethargy. Still her caution was admirable; and I sincerely believe that, as the mere individual, she greatly preferred my friend; and that, had I been simple Signor Savatelli, the son of a Palermitan banker, or of a Catanian apothecary, she would never have hesitated between us. As it was, however, I held the winning card, and the 'dear prince' had but to utter one conclusive word to leave the 'poor baronet' leagues behind in the race. How I ever betrayed her into writing such dangerous truths as this I cannot ever now comprehend, although I have more than once had occasion to remark that there is a certain class of women who, when they once take a pen into their hands, suffer it to run away with their reason.

"True it is that it was so in this instance. I wish that

Trevor had not in his rage burnt, before his faithless mistress, the last letter with which she honoured me, and then you would have acknowledged the truth of my late remark. However, suffice it that the letter in question did most effectually open his eyes, and prove to him that his fair *inamorata* was ready to fly with me from a union to which she looked forward with dismay, and to trust to my honour never to give her cause to repent the hazardous step that she had taken.

“So far, so well; but, alas! *chi la fatto il mala, faccia la penitenza*, says the proverb; and so it was with Trevor. The English laws are frequently both unreasonable and inconvenient. He had formally promised marriage to Miss Delamere, and he was bound by one of those laws to perform his promise, or to incur the risk not only of a heavy fine—for that he was too wealthy to care—but also of a public exposure, with which she did not hesitate to threaten him.

“Perhaps you expect, idlers as you are, that I am about to entertain you with the scene which ensued, when the lady discovered that she had been duped in her turn, and that she had lost, by one unlucky throw, both the foreign prince and the English baronet; and, *corpo di Bacco!* it deserves narration, but I have just now neither time nor taste for such a tale, though, in truth, her very rage was magnificent, and her indignation as genuine as though she had been no party to this war of wits. Well, to shorten a long story, she retorted every reproach of Trevor, by upbraiding him with his own treachery, and that of his Fidas Achates; and, when he swore that he would leave her for ever, she threatened him with a court of justice, and silenced him, as that threat seldom fails to silence an Englishman.

“What was to be done? Trevor had no nerve for such an exposure. To be exhibited to the world not only as a dupe, but, moreover, as the dupe of a woman who had forfeited all claim to consideration from the levity of her conduct, was more than his pride could brook. He remembered, too, that her pecuniary resources must be nearly exhausted, and that the prospect of becoming his wife had induced her to persist in a style of living to which they had long been inadequate; and thus, what from fear for himself

on the one hand, and a lingering weakness for the false fair one on the other, they at length came to a compromise. Not, however, that this desirable arrangement was made without considerable difficulty; for the lady, at once baffled and bitter, was exorbitant in her demands, and poor Trevor was obliged not only to have recourse to the Jews, but also to expatriate himself for a time, in order to satisfy her claim.

“*Ebbene!* The victim accompanied me to Berlin, and *la bella abbandonata* left London, as he supposed, to bury her regrets in the country, and for a time he heard no more of her, while, *per me*, I almost forgot her existence. Judge, therefore, of my amazement this evening, when, in a solitary stroll through the Negroni Gardens, my ear was suddenly attracted by the inflexions of a harmonious and familiar voice. I listened for several instants, in order to be satisfied that I did not deceive myself; and then, convinced of the accuracy of my memory, I suddenly turned the angle of the path, and saw before me Miss Delamere in person, negligently reclining upon the grass beside one of the fountains, with her head resting upon the shoulder of a very handsome cavalier, who also held one of her hands clasped in his.

“Nothing daunted, however, by the style of this group—for, as you are aware, I felt my strength, and was not altogether sorry to have an opportunity of making my peace, or free from the desire to see it ratified somewhat after the same fashion, I accosted her at once, and that in a tone of old acquaintanceship which forbade any denial on her part; but a change had come over her whole manner. It was neither affectedly cold, nor inferentially resentful. It was more discouraging than either; calm, self-possessed, and, could I have forgotten the past, I should say dignified. The problem, moreover, was soon solved. I began to allude to former times, and I was silenced at once by a presentation to—her husband.

“*Il povero Saviatti!*”

“You mistake, gentlemen, you mistake,” pursued the Prince, contemptuously; “you should say *il povero marito*; for, trust me, he will ere long the most deserve your pity, though at present he appears to be ‘in love with ruin.’ She informed me, and you will be able to estimate the feeling

with which she made the communication, that she had been travelling for the last two months in Italy; *ergo*, her bridehood is rapidly waning into commonplace wedded life."

"And who is the sacrifice? Is he one who has been kidnapped from our own set, or a mere matrimonial facility?"

"Therein lies the point of the epigram," said the Palermitan with a light laugh; "I was presented to the hero of the domestic drama, as I have already told you. But how? Why, simply thus: 'Prince, allow me to present to you my husband; my dear Frederic, the Prince Saviatti, of whom I have spoken to you;' and thus, you see, although it appeared that the 'great unknown' was enabled at once to identify me as one of his lady's quondam friends, I was left totally in the dark as regarded his own individuality. However, certain it is, that in whatever spirit I had been made known to him, he had no suspicion of the truth; and I almost began to imagine, from the manner in which he tolerated for a time a series of impertinences on my part, that he was simply what Rowscoffski has just politely designated as a 'matrimonial facility;' but I was mistaken. He appeared suddenly to perceive that I was transgressing the bounds of even Italian good breeding; for he started from his seat like a roused lion, and carried off *la donna*, without even permitting me to walk back to the city in her company."

"*C'est impayable!*" shouted the Frenchman, "*ce pauvre Saviatti est déchu.*"

"Then are there two fallen angels in the same drama," replied the Prince, quietly, "and I am ready to wager the hundred ducats which I won last evening of Squanderleigh, that the piece is not yet played out."

"Pshaw!" you have already had your *congé*."

"Perhaps so. Moreover, the happy couple leave Rome to-morrow; another point against me; and, nevertheless, I am ready to renew my bet, with this reservation, that if I am not myself the hero of the second act, it will be Trevor. Who accepts the challenge?"

"Not I," said Colonna; "I know too well the nature of the sex. The investment is a bad one."

A general laugh followed his remark.

Such was the circle in which the name of the woman

who had become the wife of the proud and sensitive Mortimer was branded with indignity, amid the curses of unsuccessful gamblers, the fumes of wine, and the ribaldries of licentiousness. Such were the revellers, who, not content with associating her with past disgrace and present duplicity, even presaged for her a future still more dishonourable than either. Sybil was indeed fallen ! fallen from the brightness and the purity which compel respect even from the dissolute. She had striven and had triumphed. She was the wife of a man of honour ; but her very triumph was contaminated by the fact, that he must henceforward be a mark for the world's scorn through her means ; and that world not one of upright and soberly judging individuals, who would temper their justice with mercy, and be silent, where otherwise they must condemn ; but a world of reckless *roués* and bitter satirists, to whom her shame would be matter of loose mirth and ribald speculation ; and who would, from their own intimate knowledge of the vices of humanity, be enabled to analyse and to lay bare every working of her heart, her woman heart, that pure and holy mystery, which, like the statue of Vesta, should ever wear a veil for all, save him to whom it is yielded up.

Sybil was indeed fallen !

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MEANWHILE all was deep and quiet happiness at Bletchley. The ladies of the Manor-house had paid their promised visit ; the girls had welcomed Gertrude with a warmth of delighted affection, which was balm to her meek and gentle heart ; and even Mrs. Armstrong, forgetting all the brilliant projects which she had formed for her son, and satisfied that, as her husband no longer withheld his consent to the marriage, it was her duty to think as he did ; and perhaps feeling, moreover, that she should in all probability be a person of much more importance in the eyes of her unportioned daughter-in-law than she could have hoped to be in those of the high-born or richly-dowered damsels upon whom she had formerly speculated, was no

less inclined than themselves to believe that Ernest had, after all, been less to blame than she at first supposed; while the worthy old squire, having once determined to withdraw his objections, did so with an open good-heartedness and generosity of feeling which removed the last shadow from the spirit of the orphan.

Only a few days elapsed ere Gertrude again found herself an inhabitant of the Hall, and once more all the little world of Bletchley was in commotion. It was really too bad, and too barefaced, as Miss Bayliss remarked, with considerable asperity; too bad on the side of Miss Mortimer, and too barefaced on that of the Armstrongs, that their company had no sooner dispersed than they thought proper to remember their poor neighbour. However, if the girl had no more spirit, it served her right, and she would see what would come of it before long; but it was disgraceful that, because they happened to be the great people of the neighbourhood, any one should be mean enough to encourage them in their impertinence; and Miss Mortimer, as Mr. Pilbeam declared, was so blind to the degrading part that she was acting, as actually to be recovering from day to day, even although he had long considered her case to be utterly hopeless; but there she was, as likely to live as his own wife, and as calm and contented as though she had been treated with the greatest respect.

These murmurs from the village, however, never reached the Hall. There all was peace and joy. The happiness of Ernest was complete. To sit beside Gertrude, and to watch from day to day the progress of her convalescence; to see the faint flush again steal to her cheek, and the smile of recovered confidence rest upon her lip, was to him a never-ceasing labour of love. While Somerville and Mary, more gladsome in their joy, were continually on horseback, or engaged in schemes of pleasure, the tranquil delight of Ernest and Gertrude was no less engrossing. To them the whispered confidences, the assured prospects of the future, and the present calm, were full of enjoyment. They had so much to say, so much to ask, so much to hope.

It was during one of these constantly-recurring conversations, when the twilight had stolen upon them almost unheeded, and that the pencil of Gertrude, and the volume

from which her lover had been occasionally reading, or rather murmuring, to her a few snatches from Alfieri, had alike been laid aside, that a sudden silence occurred, as eloquent to their feelings as the most profuse and impassioned words. It was at length broken by a sigh from the orphan, which fell painfully upon the ear of Ernest.

"You sigh, dearest," he said anxiously; "and wherefore?"

"Simply," replied Gertrude, "because I have left a duty unperformed for which I am self-rebuked; and that, even now, I have scarcely courage to repair my error."

"Incorrigible culprit!"

"Nay, do not jest, Ernest; for, indeed, my heart is too full for smiles. I feel that I have not acted generously or frankly towards you; and that I am, consequently, unworthy of the unhesitating confidence which you have placed in me. You may remember that, during our memorable interview in the pavilion, you hinted your belief that I was the prey of some secret sorrow; and you were right. It will require an effort on my part to recall that past; but the effort must be made; for I cannot consent to become your wife until you are placed in possession of every circumstance of my early life, and are prepared to assure me that what I have to tell has not lowered me in your esteem."

"Gertrude, why do you torture both yourself and me? I foretell all that you have to say: you have loved another."

"I have, Ernest," was the low, but resolute reply; "and that, too, with all the ardour of a young and trusting heart. Nor was this affection the mere transitory feeling of a few months, but the one great and absorbing sentiment of my life. If I know myself, I am compelled to confess, even to you, that had my love been returned, I believe that neither time nor misfortune would have sufficed to overcome it; but it was not so. I loved where my love was slighted and undervalued, and my whole waste of affection was repaid only by the attachment of a brother. But hear me out before you condemn me. My error was that of inexperience, not of levity. I was misled alike by my own hopes, and by the tenderness of one who was indeed to me more than a mother. And now, Ernest, dear Ernest, will you listen to my story of the past?"

"Say on, Gertrude," answered the young man, who had involuntarily relinquished her hand, and buried his face in his spread palms; "say on—I will endeavour to bear it manfully; but you know not how deeply you have wrung me."

The tears of the orphan fell slow and cold, as she withdrew her eyes from the averted figure of her lover, but she heeded them not. Strong in her conviction of right, she commenced her simple confession.

She told him of the premature death of her mother: of the heart-broken father, who so soon followed her to the grave. She painted to him, in rapid but graphic words, the stately old house at Westrum, which had been the cradle of her childhood and the home of her youth; and she dwelt, with all the eloquence of deep and strong feeling, upon the virtues of the gentle and high-hearted Mrs. Mortimer.

Nor did her low voice falter when she came to speak of Frederic. There was no suspicious haste, no coquettish reservation, in the manner in which she related all their early and childish affection; she did justice to his amiable qualities and to the high principle of his nature. She told how, from girlhood up, she had been taught to consider him as her future husband; and how, in order to render herself worthy of his love, she had striven to acquire the habits, feelings, and accomplishments which he approved. And after she had described the long hours of retirement in which she had listened to all the confident projects of her aunt, while the subject of their discourse was yet absent, she did not even disguise from her agitated listener the eager anxiety with which she had awaited his return; and the bitter disappointment she had experienced on finding that her attachment was not returned, when Frederic, happy and heart-free, ere many months elapsed, bestowed the affection which she had always been taught to consider as her own, upon a stranger.

"And what said your aunt, who had so cruelly misled you?" asked Ernest, suddenly looking up.

"All that the purest and most perfect affection could dictate. She wept over the blight of my visions, and her own hopes, and vowed never to receive another daughter."

"And then, Gertrude, all those visions were renewed?"

The orphan smiled a sad smile.

"No, Ernest," she said, meekly, "from the hour in which I learnt that the heart of Frederic was estranged from me, and that his happiness depended upon another, the path of duty and of self-esteem lay plain before me, and I had only to follow it to the end. Frederic, moreover, was generous enough to trust to me, and to place his cause in my hands; and believe me when I assure you that he had no cold advocate with his mother. I loved him, and to me his happiness was all in all. It sufficed that my affection was not essential to him for me to understand at once the indelicacy of sustaining what was, at best, only an imaginary claim. My poor aunt died—and with her, as you are aware, the one great tie which bound me to my father's family. In my desolation I sought a home with a distant relative, to whom I was a stranger. Miss Warrington received me, and cheerfully consented to impose another burden upon her already limited resources. I came to Bletchley, unknown, unloved, and hopeless. You know the rest."

There was a momentary silence, and the heart of Gertrude sank within her.

"And your cousin?" asked Armstrong at length, with apparent effort.

"My cousin, a few months ago, was united to Miss Delamere."

"And you still loved him, Gertrude, when we first met? When I, at once, and unreservedly, made you the arbitress of my future fate; when I placed my whole being in your hands, without a doubt, without a misgiving, you still loved this man?"

"I believed that I did so," was the low and timid reply; "and, in all probability, Ernest, had you not, by your generous affection, taught me the fallacy of my own feelings, I should have sunk into an early grave with that conviction. Remember that my affection for Frederic was one alike of habit and of hope—that I had been taught from my earliest girlhood to look upon him as the partner of my future life; that, although reared in a comfort bordering upon luxury, my seclusion had been almost unbroken; and that, in short, my whole world was comprised within the walls of Westrum House. It is not, however, for me to excuse the past. I

have simply obeyed the dictates of my nature, and fulfilled my sense of right, by removing every mystery between us, and by showing myself to you as I am. It is for you to decide if a heart which has hoped and mourned like mine, is worthy of the love that it has won.’

“Only answer me one question, Gertrude, and that with the same truthfulness which I have always seen in you. Did you love this man as you love me?” and he again seized her hand.

“I could not. I am now conscious that, in the ignorance of my spirit, I mistook myself. I loved rather the creation of my own fancy, the cherished son of my more than mother. I loved Frederic, not for himself, but for others. I lamented him not for himself, but because with him I lost all. In short,” concluded the poor girl, with a passionate burst of tears, “I despise myself for an illusion which was dissipated from the moment in which I discovered that I had long unconsciously suffered a deeper and a more vital attachment to obliterate the past. And oh! Ernest, were you aware for how long a period your image was in my heart, while I believed it was absorbed by another, you would understand all that I would say, all that I feel.”

“I do! I do! Gertrude, and I thank you,” exclaimed her lover with renewed tenderness; “we will never again look back upon the past. What was the love of the girl beside the affection of the woman? I have been irritable and unjust, dearest, when I should rather have been proud of the trust which you repose in me, and of your faith in my right feeling. You have acted nobly, Gertrude, and once more I thank you. And now, did you not assure me, that no other secret exists between us, and that this tale of girlish romance was the sole mystery of your past life?”

“I did, and truly, Ernest. You have now read my heart, which has not a thought that it would hesitate to confide to you—not a feeling or a hope of which you are not the object.”

And still the twilight deepened about them, and the glowing firelight alone flickered through the silent apartment, and revealed each to the other in that luxurious partial obscurity so dear to those whose thoughts are full of quiet happiness. For a moment the pride of Ernest

Armstrong had been wounded. He could not brook that Gertrude, his own Gertrude, the only woman whom he had ever loved, should have felt for another what he had felt only for her; but he was too right-minded to persist in so weak an egotism, and he soon forgot his own disappointment in admiration of the delicacy which had taught the timid girl beside him to consider as a crime the reservation of a fact which so nearly concerned his happiness, and to compel herself to an avowal so painful to her feelings, in order to convince him that she was worthy of a love in which she thus ventured to confide.

Henceforward he could have no misgivings. The past stood revealed before him. The pure and guileless heart had poured forth all its treasures of memory, and was indeed his own. One short half hour of suffering had secured to him a life of trust and peace; and the more he reflected upon the voluntary and unembarrassed confidence of Gertrude, the more he became conscious of the whole beauty and holiness of a nature which shrank from even the semblance of deceit and dishonour.

And Gertrude, too, was happy, for her sensitive conscience was relieved of a heavy weight. Ernest now knew, and had pardoned, all. She might henceforward yield herself up, without one misgiving, to the bliss of loving and being loved. All the memory of the past appeared to fade into so far a distance, that it rather wore the misty indistinctness of a painful dream than the sterner features of reality. All seemed unreal, save the actual present, with its dear delights of peace, and love, and joy. Her very tears were luxury; and the throbbing of her heart made delicious music as she listened to its quick pulsations.

Meanwhile, she affected to be busily engaged in collecting and sorting the wools which were scattered over her tapestry-frame—a task rendered almost impossible by the partial darkness; and, as she was thus employed, a small morocco souvenir, clasped with gold, fell from the basket in which she was arranging them at the feet of her companion, who, hastily lifting it from the floor, laid his finger upon the lock, and was about to open it, when Gertrude eagerly stretched out her hand, exclaiming—

“No, no; you must not unclasp those tablets, Ernest; indeed you must not!”

"What! another secret, Gertrude?"

There was no reply, as the head of the orphan was averted for an instant; but, ere long, she repeated, beseechingly—

"If you love me, dear Ernest, do not open them. You will laugh at me, and I cannot endure your ridicule."

"Laugh at you, Gertrude! Why, what have you been doing? Inditing a sonnet to the moon, or composing an elegy on a dead robin?"

"Now you are too absurd."

"Justify yourself by authorizing me to open the tablets."

"Be generous, Ernest, and give them up."

"Excuse me; I covet them. You have never yet made me a present. I accept these."

"Well, then, since it must be so," said Gertrude, half-laughing and half-annoyed, "you may keep them; but only on condition that you do not retain the contents."

"Agreed!" shouted the young man, as he bounded towards the fire-place to examine his prize. "Why, what dry twig is this?" he asked, after the silence of a moment, as he drew from between two folds of satin a bunch of withered leaves. "And is this the treasure that I am bound to restore?"

"It is, dear Ernest," whispered the soft, low voice of Gertrude, as her small hand was pressed lightly upon his shoulder; "and to me it is indeed a treasure."

"But what is it, dearest?"

"Another and a happier record of the past," blushed the orphan, as her lover folded his arm about her waist, and drew her to his heart; "the faded cluster-rose of the garden pavilion."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE Mortimers were domesticated at Westrum, and Mrs. Delamere established in her favourite arm-chair as she was wont to be at The Grange; but the old house was soon subjected to a metamorphosis which would have rendered

it irrecognisable to its former owners. The first care of Mortimer, on his return to England, had been to desire Sybil to select from among the luxuries in her former home all those which she was desirous to retain; and, this done, a public auction desecrated that long exclusive abode. The house itself was placed in the hands of an agent, for sale; but, with intuitive delicacy, Frederic so made his arrangements that not a single suspicion of the insolvency of its late proprietors supplied food for the gossipry of the neighbourhood.

Nothing could be more natural than that Mr. Mortimer should prefer the ancestral associations of his own birth-place to the mere splendours of a strange property, unendured to him by any familiar memories, and, consequently, no comments were made upon so simple a fact; and while these changes were in progress, little or no alteration was perceptible in the mood or manner of the newly-married man. The quiet, unobtrusive gratitude of Mrs. Delamere, who once more saw herself surrounded by her accustomed luxuries, and left to their enjoyment without one misgiving as to their continuance, revealed itself in occasional snatches of deep feeling and earnest affection, and was balm to his wounded spirit; but the excitement consequent upon these domestic arrangements at an end, a gloom gathered upon the brow of Mortimer, which not even the fascinations of his beautiful Sybil had power to banish, even infatuated as he still was by her attractions.

It was consequently with less mortification than he would once have felt that, after the residence of only a few short months at Westrum, Frederic heard his once adored Sibyl again and again recur to the unpalatable subject of his social insignificance, and reproach him with a supineness which left him unknown and obscure, when, by a slight exertion of energy, he might be battling his way to fortune, and, better still, to the consideration and respect of his fellow men. He had no longer an absorbing passion with which to counteract the dormant spirit of ambition she strove so resolutely to awaken, and he listened until he began to feel that she might be right, and that he had, indeed, hitherto mistaken his own nature when he believed that he was unfitted to wrestle with the world, and to grapple his way to greatness. He did not comprehend

that it was the mere yearning of an unsatisfied heart for something to which it might attach itself; for some new and powerful interest by which it might be filled, which so misled his reason; while it is, moreover, certain that it requires unusual vigour of mind and decision of character to enable a man to withstand the influence of the woman whom he has once passionately loved, and who has become the partner of his life.

One violent passion can rarely be conquered save by a second still more vehement; and no sooner did Mortimer find some moments of solitude—and they were many, for already had Sybil surrounded herself by interests, most of which were distinct from his own—than he began to believe that he had hitherto mistaken the path to happiness; that it was mere idle absurdity to seek it under his own roof, and in the society of a woman who refused to repay the fervent and overwhelming affection he had lavished upon her by the confidence to which, as her husband, and the companion of her future life, he was so well entitled; and that the home happiness, of which he had once so fondly dreamt, was a brilliant fallacy, with which he had been cheated, like many others, and from whose influence it behoved him to liberate himself.

This was precisely the state of feeling to which Sybil had been anxious to lead him; and, as she detected the workings of his mind, she redoubled all her efforts to complete the task which she had so skilfully commenced. She gradually became subdued, and almost sad. The air of Westrum, and the monotony of their daily existence, depressed her. She had no faith in the local practitioners, and her situation made her anxious to reside for a time in town, where she could secure competent advice.

Such an argument was, of course, unanswerable, even if Mortimer had felt inclined to oppose her project, but such was far from being the case. It is true that he had hoped to see the inheritor of his fortune born beneath the roof of his forefathers, as he himself had been; but this was a secondary consideration, which could not for a moment be placed in comparison with the safety of the mother and the preservation of the infant: and Mrs. Mortimer had consequently no sooner expressed her wish to remove to

London than immediate preparations were made to gratify her inclinations.

Satisfied by her success Sybil became once more almost the Sybil who had beguiled him of his better reason. She spoke of his worldly distinction as certain, flattered his self-esteem by enumerating the many advantages under which he would commence his diplomatic career, and declared herself ready to make any personal sacrifice which might tend to his advancement, and once more Mortimer was beguiled.

Within a fortnight they were established in a first-rate hotel, having left the supine Mrs. Delamere sole mistress at Westrum, and as the London season had not yet commenced they had ample opportunity to select such a residence as they deemed suitable. Upon this point, however, considerable difficulty was experienced, the views of the husband by no means coinciding with those of the wife. In their house hunt—one of the most disagreeable occupations, *par parenthèse*, to which poor human beings can be subjected—Mortimer steadily bore in mind the amount of his income, while Sybil as resolutely discarded all such considerations.

“Were we about to reside altogether in town,” was her constant argument, “or were we here merely for purposes of pleasure, a very moderate establishment might suffice, provided always that the situation were unexceptionable; but you must not forget that you have an important purpose in view, and that an ostentatious display of economy will by no means advance your interests. One mistake at such a moment as this may be fatal to your prospects, and you are about wilfully to commit the most serious error into which you could possibly be betrayed.”

What marvel that Mortimer ultimately suffered himself to be subjugated by these specious sophistries; that an elegant residence was secured in one of the most fashionable squares; that a splendid establishment was formed, and that the equipages, jewels, and opera-box of Mrs. Mortimer were upon a consistent scale; that the “Morning Post” duly informed its readers of all the movements of the family; that Tattersall rejoiced in the patronage of Mr. Mortimer; and that he was, through the good offices of half-a-dozen of his former friends, who hastened to welcome

him to town, in a very short space of time balloted into two of the leading clubs?

Heart-sick and homeless, for all was glare and representation in the mansion of which he had become the temporary master, Mortimer soon discovered innumerable attractions in the almost bachelor life to which he was thus restored; while Sybil, on her side, saw with gratified vanity and ill-concealed triumph that she was instantly recognised by half-a-score of her former acquaintance, who were only too happy to renew what they were pleased to consider as an old friendship, as they caracolled beside her carriage in the ring, or partook of the elegant hospitality of her husband.

Thus, for a time, all went smoothly; and as the period drew near at which Mrs. Mortimer anticipated the birth of her child, and that she was comparatively unable to plunge into the vortex of dissipation by which she was surrounded, Mortimer found his expenditure, although serious, yet still defined and regular; and, amid the pressure of amusement without, he ere long forgot his anxiety upon the subject.

Not even the habits of dissipation, which he was rapidly acquiring, sufficed, however, to deaden him to the delight of being a father; and when at length his beautiful Sybil placed in his arms her lovely little girl, he felt all the better feelings of his nature welling forth again, and made a thousand prudent resolutions for the future. But, alas for Frederic! constitutionally unstable, he was now, moreover, under the influence of a firmer spirit than his own, and his wife had formed far different projects. Debarred for a few weeks from those exciting pleasures which had been the business of her youth, and had become to her vain and ambitious nature almost a necessity, she had in her temporary retirement only grown more than ever anxious to compensate to herself for the time that she had lost, and accordingly she listened with a quiet smile to the sententious orations of her husband, yawned as seldom as possible, and satisfied herself by pursuing her own course as resolutely as though they had never been uttered.

Yet, skilful tactician as she was, Sybil had nevertheless the mortification to perceive that her train was composed only of such of her former friends as still remained un-

married, and that it was rarely a female guest graced her splendid home. In vain did she hint to the dangles who pressed about her, that she should gladly welcome their sisters, their mothers, or their aunts. The answer was always ready. One would immediately have presented Maria, but she moved in a set of her own, and would feel herself perfectly *désorientée* if she were to venture beyond it; another would at once have brought his mother to pay her respects to Mrs. Mortimer, but really Lady Elizabeth was such a “quiz,” so prim, so pious, and so straitlaced, that he had not courage to subject her to such an ordeal; for, after all, she *was* his mother, and he did not wish to peril his own popularity with his charming friend by inflicting such a penance upon her; while a third hinted the coquettish propensities of his widowed aunt, from whom he had certain expectations, and who would never forgive him were he to place her in a position so inimical to her vanity. And thus each excused himself with the best grace in the world as regarded his female relatives, although all were alike devoted to the charms of their hostess, and the good cheer of their host, whom they amused in his turn by assurances of their best efforts to second his diplomatic views, and professions of intimacy with ministers, secretaries of state, and influential individuals of all parties.

Gradually Sybil saw a few of the most fashionable women in town gather about her—women of wealth and rank—who possessed all the advantages of life, save, indeed, perhaps, an unsullied reputation; and she found it easy, even amid her pride, to discredit the rumours which, from time to time, were intruded upon her on this subject.

“The world was so censorious,” she declared, with a frown of virtuous indignation; “there was so much party-spirit in English society; so many petty jealousies and idle slanders, ever ready to destroy the best and the brightest, that she would never believe that Lady Clara Flushing had been divorced from her lord from any cause more grave than an incompatibility of temper, in which he was doubtless as much to blame as herself; nor that Mrs. Babington had been forbidden to appear at court for any other reason than that the politics of her husband were unpalatable to the royalties.

In the case of Mrs. Mortimer it might, indeed, truly be said that charity had, in this instance, covered a multitude of sins; but, meanwhile, Lady Clara, Mrs. Babbington, *é tutti quanti*, were all handsome, high-bred, and accomplished women, who gave a new grace to her drawing-room, and attracted about her all that was most distinguished of the other sex.

Constantly in a crowd, absorbed in perpetual dissipation, and more beautiful than ever, Sybil was as independent of her husband's affection as he was rapidly becoming of her own; and, as she always met him with a smile whenever the accidents of a London life threw them together, that she was always well dressed, did honour to his taste, and sedulously supported his importance in society, he began to believe that, after all, he had perhaps no right to expect more; and that his former dreams of home-happiness and domestic bliss were a mere idle chimera.

And thus time wore on until the season drew near its close, and the languor of exhaustion began to replace the mad excitement which had for the last few months characterised the leviathan city. Royalty had withdrawn to the stately towers and terraces of Windsor; the strawberry-leaves were transferred from town mansions to lordly halls and hereditary castles; men of fashion forsook their clubs, and women of *ton* ceased their cabals. The seething caldron of high-life, which had so long bubbled even to the brim, emptied itself to the very dregs; and London was no longer habitable, save for those obscure and unimportant individuals who are compelled, by their necessities, to remain chained to the wheels of the vast machine, and to labour at its preservation, lest the pulsations of its mighty heart should cease to beat, and thus the pleasures and the luxuries of the great should suffer at a future day.

The Mortimers, as a matter of course, followed the example of their associates, and retreated from London to the country; but, unlike most of them, Frederic would not consent to increase the revenues of the Post Office by subjecting himself to the importunate "reminders" of a host of creditors, and accordingly satisfied every claim which could be made upon him before he would consent

to return to Westrum: the amount of his responsibilities, as a natural consequence of the life which he had been leading, more than doubling its anticipated extent.

We are so apt to forget the by-gone superfluities which we regarded as necessities when we indulged in them, but which, like the magical blue fishes in Vathek, find a tongue when conjured by the potent wand of the better-remembered creditor, that the very wisest of us are apt to be bewildered at times in our arithmetic; no marvel, therefore, that Mortimer was fearfully startled by his own defective calculation. But he had little time either to regret or to resolve; for, although Sybil could no longer remain in London, she had at least arranged to transfer her own immediate fraction of London to the obscure retirement of Westrum; and as the infant and its nurse had been sent forward, as well as half-a-dozen servants, to prepare the house for the reception of the expected guests, and that, moreover, Lady Clara was too timid to travel so far alone, and consequently accompanied her dear friend, Mrs. Mortimer, in her own chariot, while the master of Westrum made his way back to his ancestral home by the mail, attended by his confidential servant: he had neither leisure nor opportunity to impress upon Sybil the vital importance of retrenchment.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SYBIL did the honours of her house to perfection; and, although such a crowd of fashionables had never, since its erection been collected beneath that roof, every one was soon perfectly at home except its master. The summer was brilliant, and the grounds, thanks to the provisions of their mistress, were in full beauty. Not one natural facility had remained unimproved; and, as the gardener had been transferred from The Grange, and the less skilful functionary, who had grown grey in the family, had been compelled to cede his place to this more scientific florist, marvels had been wrought which asto-

nished, even if they did not altogether gratify, her husband.

Nor was the change within the mansion less striking than that without; but, although even the beloved library in which Mortimer had been accustomed to spend so great a portion of his time in studious and delightful solitude, was invaded at all hours, he felt the futility of remonstrance, and was compelled to console himself by the reflection that at least its most cherished treasures were suffered to remain undisturbed, and that it was in quest only of the ephemeral productions of the day that the idlers who now thronged his saloons, so continually broke in upon him with those vapid demi-apologies, which are rather an impertinence than a courtesy.

And, moreover, one source of happiness was still open to him, in whose pure enjoyment none sought to interfere, and that one was the presence and the affection of his child, who already received him with eager cries of joy and outstretched arms whenever he approached the remote nursery to which she had been consigned, lest her baby-griefs should prove too audible for high-bred nerves.

And he was enabled to do this freely, and almost without comment, for the brilliant circle of his wife were for the most part alike careless and regardless of his movements; while Sybil herself, who was provided with an admirable *souffre-douleur* in the person of her mother, was quite as willing as her guests to dispense with the presence of her husband.

All Westrum was in amazement. The main street of the little town was alive with equipages and horsemen. Provident milliners secured the "last London fashions" from the transient glimpses which they obtained of the fashionable dames as they were whirled along; the breathless postmaster was no longer the emporium of news and gossip, for the duties of his office occupied every hour of his time; the stalwart carrier, who had long, from prudential motives, remained a bachelor, hastened to claim his promised bride on the strength of his influx of business; and emulous shopkeepers ventured on luxurious innovations hitherto unattempted.

Nor, while such was the sensation produced among the traders, did the gentry of Westrum remain uninterested

spectators of the progress of events at the great house. All such as from local position and old custom were privileged to pay their respects there, hastened to enforce that privilege; and even Mortimer himself was satisfied with the courtesy of their reception. The smile of Sybil was as winning, her words as bland, to the prosy rector, and the sententious physician, as to those of her own set. He, in the honesty of his nature, did not understand the necessity, of which his wife was fully conscious, of conciliating all the visitable population of the neighbourhood, in order to render them available whenever it might be expedient. He forgot that the court cards are at times useless without the remainder of the pack; and that it is by shuffling them together that the just value of each is elicited in the great game of life; but the more far-sighted Sybil did not suffer so obvious a fact to escape her.

While Lady Clara could criticize alike the cap and the courtesy of worthy Mrs. Collins, she could afford to spare her own friends; nor was it less desirable to veil, by a drapery of muslin petticoats, the occasional *tête-à-têtes* in which pretty little Mrs. Babington delighted to indulge on a particular settée behind the grand piano.

Let it not be supposed, however, that the honour of visiting at the great house was gratuitously purchased, for such was far from being the case. During the lifetime of its former gentle and unpretending mistress no moral dais had been raised; no one was compelled to feel that he or she must take their places below the salt; but under the reign of Sybil all was changed. It was doubtlessly pleasant enough for the physician's comely wife, and the rector's good-natured daughters, to comment on the morrow to their admiring and jealous friends upon the courtly society with which they had so lately mingled; and where they had rather been grouped in order to enhance the graces of the principal personages upon the stage, as the *coryphées* of the opera form a living back-ground to the Taglionis and the Ceritos, and to fill up the occasional pauses of weariness which necessarily ensue in all struggles of display, than receive upon equal terms. Who could venture a second time to address a peer's daughter, who vouchsafed no reply beyond a look of wonder at the presumption; or to tender any courtesy to a coquette whose soul was in her flounces?

And yet the worthy people bore all this, and returned again and again, and affected not to perceive that they were merely the pawns upon Mrs. Mortimer's chess-board, in order that they might revenge their own mortification upon the dear friends against whom the portal of this earthly paradise was closed.

Among the guests of Sybil was a certain Mrs. Lamerly, who was, for some unexplained, and it might be inexplicable, reason, more obnoxious to Mortimer than any other of his lady-visitors. Assuredly it was not from wounded vanity that he disliked her; for, if any of the guests occasionally condescended to remember that Westrum House had a master, it was pretty, languishing Mrs. Lamerly, who by some accident had more than once encountered him in his walks, and had even caressed his child. Mrs. Lamerly—as she assured him with a sigh, and ~~with~~ ^{with} dropping of the lids which veiled a pair of large and ~~and~~ ^{and} affective blue eyes as dark as amethysts—doated upon ~~her~~ ^{her} crie; and had it pleased Providence to make her a mother, she was afraid that she should have suffered that one affection to absorb her whole existence. What could be so pure, so beautiful, so holy, as the tie which linked a mother to her child? Did not Mr. Mortimer agree with her that all other tenderness was poor and puerile in comparison? Truly did he in his very heart of hearts; although he only smiled vacantly in reply, as he drew his laughing girl closer to his bosom.

Mrs. Lamerly had, indeed, touched the right chord, but she had done it unskilfully, and it only jarred where it should have soothed. Mortimer disliked this woman. She had been one of the early friends of Sybil, and one of the most eager to renew their acquaintance. She had eloped when very young with the dissipated scion of a noble house, whom his friends, weary of perpetually repairing the effects of his improvidence, at length sent into honourable exile as *attaché* at one of the petty German courts; where he was ultimately interred with all honour, leaving his young and pretty widow penniless. He had, indeed, made an appeal to his family in her behalf a short time before his death, but it had been made in vain, none knew wherefore; while it was not the less certain that the lady continued for a couple of years to inhabit the same

city, frequent the same court, and maintain the same appearance, by some occult faculty known only to herself.

At length, however, the *maladi du pays* declared itself, and she returned to England followed by the regrets of the Margrave, and the compliments of the whole court circle; as languid and as languishing as ever, with a comfortable although somewhat mysterious income, and a magnificent diamond bracelet.

We have said that Mortimer greatly disliked the diplomatist's widow—could it be prescience? He never asked himself the question; he only felt that even her blandishments were distasteful to him. And yet Mrs. Lamerly was a general favourite in her set; she simpered out her inanities with such a low, sweet drawl; she told such piquant stories of Herr Graf Such a One, and the Gräfinne So and So, without appearing to be at all aware of the somewhat startling point of her own anecdotes; she sang such deliciously wild and guttural Slavonic ballads almost with a lisp; she was so original, so odd, and so entertaining, and she had such fine eyes, that it would have been matter of wonder that she still remained Mrs. Lamerly, had she not lingered so long at that petty German court.

But if, even for Sybil, there was still a mystery attached to her friend, it was by no means reciprocal as regarded herself; for the simple, smiling, and apparently unsuspecting little widow was well aware of every incident in the career of her brilliant hostess; and as she looked around her, and contrasted the opulence by which Mrs. Mortimer was surrounded with her own comparatively confined resources, and then, with her usual well-concealed shrewdness, discovered the vacillation of her husband's character, she began to ask herself how long such a discrepancy need exist, were he to be exposed to fascinations of a different description, and that she were to exert her own peculiar powers of pleasing.

There was something very agreeable to her vanity in such a speculation; and although, in the first instance, it had been a mere idle fancy, the offspring of indolence and an inordinate love of luxury, the thought recurred again and again, until it piqued her self-esteem into a desire to prove whether, indeed, her foreign graces could not accom-

plish such a revolution. She had no fear of robbing Mortimer of the heart of Sybil, for she had read that heart to its very core, and she knew the "perilous stuff" of which it was composed; while, as regarded Frederic himself, she had not been a week beneath his roof before she discovered that all his affection was now centred in his child, and that his passion for his wife was rapidly degenerating into the most encouraging indifference.

Mrs. Lamerly was a coquette by nature, and consequently she did not pause to ask herself what might be the actual result of her machinations to either party. She only remarked that Mortimer was by many degrees the handsomest man of their set; and never doubting that she could also render him the most agreeable, she determined at any rate to try her strength, if it were only *pour passer le temps*; and therefore it was that she contrived to waylay him in his walks, and that she conceived so flattering an affection for his child.

Mortimer believed himself to be as susceptible and sensitive as ever to all which touched his honour; but his principles had in reality become unconsciously enervated by constant contact with profligacy and folly; and if he still despised the loose jests of the dissolute, and the social vices of the lax, it was rather because they were repugnant to his taste, than that they alarmed his virtue.

Mrs. Lamerly was not discouraged. She had a great card to play; and although her vanity would have been gratified could she have been indebted for her triumph solely to the spell of her own attractions, still her spirit of emulation was aroused, and she resolved not to be baffled.

There was a strong bond between herself and Sybil. Ostensibly it was that of old affection and happy memories of renewed friendship and perfect confidence; but, in reality, it was one of mutual apprehension. Sybil was well aware that many of the secrets of her past life were in the keeping of her former friend, who was as conscious as herself of the necessity of their concealment from her husband; while the widow, on her side, long habituated to all the luxuries of existence, to many of which her present income was inadequate, too well appreciated the advantages to be derived from even a temporary home

like that of Mrs. Mortimer, to cast them from her lightly.

It was in consequence of this conviction that she still for a while compelled herself to temporise; but although she succeeded in teaching the beautiful infant to clap its little hands and crow at her approach, permitted it to tear her costly veil of Brussels point without betraying the slightest irritation, and even induced it to leave its father's arms to nestle in her own, still that father remained cold; and she was at length driven to confess to herself that her childish graces were expended upon him in vain.

Languid and listless as it pleased her to appear, Mrs. Lamerly possessed strong passions, and a perseverance in all she undertook to accomplish, which amounted to obstinacy. No wonder, then, that mortified vanity in this instance aroused all the darker impulses of her nature. Had he even loved Sybil, she could have understood this resolute indifference on the part of Mortimer; but her self-esteem had not even this poor consolation.

At length her patience was exhausted, and she resolved to incur any risk rather than fail in her purpose. Like all sentimental women, she indulged in an elaborate correspondence. No letter-bag ever arrived at Westrum which did not contain half a dozen closely-written epistles to the address of Mrs. Lamerly; and it was curious to see the indolent and impassive beauty seated at her desk, in her turn rapidly covering sheet after sheet of delicately tinted vellum with the most minute characters, and to watch the facility with which the crow-quill poured forth its stream of soundless words.

Mortimer was too proud to place himself in competition with the foplings by whom his wife was surrounded, and thus he left them a free field in which to display their arts of fascination; but would he do so were he pitted against a more formidable opponent? Would he not awaken to a full sense of his danger, if he once saw her the object of adoration to a man with whom he could only doubtingly compare himself? And in this case would he not meet a friend, a counsellor? A slight and gratulatory flush rose to her cheek as she glanced around her. Where could he so fitly seek that friend as in her-

self? Had she not already knit between them the bond of his child's affection, which, appear to disregard it as he might, she felt well assured must nevertheless have, in some degree, produced its effect?

What fervent passions have sprung from a far weaker cause! The haughty spirit, once humbled to seek for help and consolation in the eyes and on the lips of a pretty and designing woman, seldom recovers heart-whole from the moral prostration. Like the silly lamb, he leaves some portion of his fleece upon the brambles; and it was upon this contingency that Mrs. Lamerly cleverly calculated. And, meanwhile, what might be the effect of her design on Sybil? A curve of scorn rose to her lip, and trembled there for an instant. Let Sybil look to herself; her honour was in her own keeping. Her honour! How subtle are the distinctions made by the world on the subject of female honour.

The widow laughed in her sleeve; bitterly perhaps, but still she laughed. Mrs. Mortimer was *blasée*, it is true; had been the jest of half London for a season; had jilted the man to whom she was affianced; had volunteered elopement with another under very precarious circumstances; and had finally enriched herself with the spoils of her first dupe; but still she was an honourable woman, married to an honourable man, who would consider it incumbent upon him to send a bullet through the heart of any one bold enough to assail her reputation; while she herself—there needed no demon-whisper in her ear to urge her on; but it came—close, mocking, and baneful as the blasts of the simoom; and the little heart which a career of vice and folly had spared to her, parched and withered beneath the scorching breath of jealousy and mortification.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"SYBIL," said Mrs. Lamerly, in her most insinuating tone, as they stood together arranging some exotic plants in a *jardinière*, as female taste only *can* arrange them, "I have *such* a favour to ask of you."

"What is it?" demanded her companion in reply, moving a few paces backward as she spoke, in order to ascertain the effect of her last grouping; "I trust, not to sanction your sending for your blue macaw; you know that my mother's nerves cannot sustain its screams; so, do pray be rational, and not urge it again."

"I was not even thinking of Jacko, poor dear," pouted the simple beauty, "though you know how I miss him; but tell me, if I did ask you to admit another pet, who never screams, and who could not disturb Mrs. Delamere, or anybody else, would you refuse?"

"That depends entirely upon the nature of your plaything."

The little widow indulged in a peal of rich and ringing laughter, which sounded like the very echo of a joyous heart; as, smoothing her glossy ringlets before a mirror, and drawing closer the *cordillère* of her pink satin *douillette*, she said, with an arch look, "You must, in such an establishment as yours, still have one bachelor's room available."

"And if so, Amabel?"

"Why, then, I would ask you to allow me to supply it with an occupant."

"I must first know whom you would introduce."

"No one to whom you at least will object, *Madame la Châtelaine*, said the widow, with a peculiar expression, "unless, indeed, like many of our monopolising sex, you will neither take nor give."

"Speak plainly, Amabel, if you would be answered."

"I *will* speak plainly," said Mrs. Lamerly, with a sudden change of voice and manner. "Trevor is just returned to England. All Mortimer, as you are, you cannot have forgotten Trevor, Sybil? We met abroad; and time, as you are aware, works wonders. You were married; and, in short," lisped out the lady, bashfully inclining her head towards her left shoulder, until her long, light curls rested upon the glowing satin, "I have reason to suppose that I almost succeeded in consoling him."

"You!" involuntarily exclaimed her listener, as, with burning cheek and flashing eyes, she glanced towards the little doll-like figure beside her; "you succeeded in consoling him? Am I to understand that he loves you?"

“You are to draw your own conclusions when we meet?” tranquilly replied the widow, as she re-arranged a cape-jesamine; “thus much, however, I will tell you, that I was the depository of his regrets and his despair; that I it was who played the Desdemona to your jealous Othello; and that, while I was very near loving him,

‘For the (gauntlet) he had run,’

I have sufficient grounds for believing that

‘He did love me, that I did pity him.’”

“Am I to understand, Amabel,” asked Mrs. Mortimer, suddenly becoming pale as the blossom of the arum near which she stood, “that Sir Horace Trevor made you his confidante?”

“That is a searching question, Sybil,” was the smiling retort; “but I will be frank, and answer at once ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ To tell you the truth, I heard as little as I could; for I hate men to entertain me by talking of other women when they should be thinking only of myself. You loved him, he said, or at least he loved you, and you were to be married, and all that sort of thing. Not as I was to poor Augustus, but surrounded by all the proprieties—parsons, and proctors, and postilions in scarlet jackets; when suddenly you jilted him. Yes, I am afraid, Sybil, that, in order to be quite fair and open with you, I must confess that he said you—had—jilted him. Naughty girl! who could not be satisfied with anything short of a prince; and, silly woman! who, having made up her mind to catch her bird, was not careful to lime the twig thickly enough.”

“And was this all he told you?” again asked Sybil, with difficulty controlling her emotion, whose very excess enabled her to despise the taunt of her companion. “Did he tell you no more than this?”

“It may be that he did,” said the widow, listlessly throwing herself upon a sofa; “but you know of old, Sybil, that I am a bad listener; and my memory has become *so* defective since I lost poor dear Augustus, that I really remember very little that has happened to me since.”

“Listen to me, nevertheless, Amabel,” said her companion, with compressed and bloodless lips, “you may

succeed in deceiving others, but I *know you*. We were girls together, and your baby caprices cannot beguile me. What is your intention, what your view, in bringing Trevor here? Do not lose sight of the fact that I may have less interest than yourself in forgetting the past."

"I have already told you," was the sullen reply; "I believe that Trevor admires me—and—I am poor."

"I understand," said Mrs. Mortimer, with a contempt which she did not even seek to conceal, "but I doubt that my husband will consent to receive such a guest. Even before our marriage, Trevor was distasteful to him."

"Perhaps so," was the careless reply; "he feared a rival, but of course that danger is now past; and if you represent the matter to him in its true light, I cannot see what valid objection he could raise."

"And yet you have been a wife, Amabel."

"I have, and therefore I have not now to learn that these things are easily arranged. Besides, Sybil, Mortimer can only rejoice in the opportunity of displaying his triumph to your discarded lover."

The words were common-place enough; but there was something in the tone in which they were uttered which jarred alike upon the pride and upon the fears of Mrs. Mortimer. The war of wits was equal, and there needed no magician to prove to Sybil that her dear friend held her in the toils. Accordingly, she forced a smile, and throwing herself down beside her, said, in a tone which she struggled to render playful—

"Come, now, Amabel, be true for once, and tell me if you indeed anticipate that you shall one day be Lady Trevor."

"If Horace can really forget you, I am sure I shall."

"Then are you not throwing away your best chance by asking him here—*here*, where we shall be brought into close and constant contact? Mark me, Amabel, I do not believe for an instant that you have anything to fear from my influence, but you know that men are wayward, and surely it would be more judicious——"

"To give him time to forget me altogether. Is that what you would say, Sybil? I give you all due credit for

your humility; and I will so far put faith in it as to tell you that I feel quite satisfied you will not exert your influence to my detriment; while, as a natural consequence, Trevor will henceforward consider you only as the wife of his friend, and therefore beyond his reach. Thus, you see that I have nothing to apprehend."

"Amabel, would you only be honest and straightforward for five minutes——"

Mrs. Lamerly laughed; not scornfully or satirically, but as though she really thought the dialogue in which she was engaged very amusing.

"Will you at least hear me?"

"Of course. Do you not perceive that I am listening with all my ears, and that I am vastly entertained to discover that Sybil married has as great a confidence in the effect of her charms as she had in her first girlhood? Why, my dear, my vanity has aged tenfold more than your own; and it is as much as I dare venture to expose my *preux chevalier* to the captivations of so accomplished a coquette, even now, when she is hedged round with the proprieties of wedded life. But Sybil," she added, with affected solemnity, as she shook her head, while her chestnut tresses shimmered in the sunlight, "I know all the onerous obligations of matrimony, and all the rigid duties which it involves."

"Why are you so unaccommodating?"

"I have already told you that he is distateful to Frederic."

"Why, so are fifty other things. He hates Lady Clara, and snubs Lord John; and yet here they are. He detests a house full of flirts and fools; and you will admit that if you are good-natured enough to make room for Trevor, he will be the most rational man, and I the most rational woman, under your roof."

"If I were only convinced that Sir Horace really intended to make you his wife," said Sybil, doubtingly, "all my objections would at once be overcome; but, Amabel, Trevor is a man of the world, and he knew you abroad."

"He did so;" replied Mrs. Lamerly, with the most provoking *à plomb*; "and, in like manner, Mr. Mortimer is a man of fortune and family, and yet, Sybil, he is your husband. Do not let us taunt each other, love. There

are some ugly proverbs which might be brought to bear upon us both. In one word, will you receive Trevor *as my friend* or not?"

Mrs. Mortimer stood for a moment irresolute; all her habitual self-possession had forsaken her; and it was in an ill-assured voice that she at length said, "You are ungenerous, Amabel; but I can deny you nothing. Only, if I consent to admit Trevor here, you must promise to keep a secret for me; a poor and puerile one, it is true, but still it must be kept."

"And you will confide it to me?" exclaimed Mrs. Lamerly, with a genuine joy, which she strove to conceal under an affectation of childish eagerness."

"I have no alternative, or perhaps I should hesitate to do so," replied Sybil, with haughty bitterness, "but this it is; before my marriage with Mr. Mortimer, Sir Horace visited The Grange in order to—to renew his suit——"

A low and almost inaudible laugh broke from the parted lips of her listener; but she was too much excited to remark it.

"Conscious of the jealous temperament of Frederic," pursued Sybil, "and aware that our previous engagement had authorised, in Trevor's eyes at least, a familiarity of manner which my captious suitor would never tolerate; and, in fact, driven to some such expedient by the circumstance of his having come upon us when Horace had raised my hand to his lips——"

"Fie, naughty Horace!" broke in the exulting widow, affecting to hide her eyes in her jewelled hands. "But was that all?"

"ALL, Mrs. Lamerly!" said Sybil, sternly. "And that *all*, simple as it was, would have sufficed to estrange from me for ever the hand, if not the heart, of Mr. Mortimer, had I not, upon the impulse of the moment, presented the stranger to him as my cousin."

"Enviably present of mind!" said the widow, with a smile, which partook rather of contempt than admiration. "How the dear old Margrave would have enjoyed such a *tour de force*! Really, my dear Sybil, you are inimitable! And what said your simple Corydon to his new connexion?"

"He bore with him for my sake; and that is all that I

can expect, should he again be compelled to receive him as a guest."

"Poor Horace! However, I will endeavour to compensate to him for the slights of the happy mortal who won you from him. And so I may tell him to come—may I not? And you will welcome him for my sake, for he is at present quite *désorienté*; only a week from Italy, where he saw your old friend Saviatti, who told him that he had seen you, and all about poor Signor Mortimer being as jealous as an ogre; and a host of other things that you will be delighted to hear. And I will promise to be generous, and to lend him to you until he has emptied his budget; after which *gare le loup*, for I am a little demon when I am thwarted in what the French prettily call 'affairs of the heart.'"

And so the two friends parted.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"FALSE pride, my pretty Gertrude, nothing but false pride," said Mr. Armstrong, gaily, as the orphan stood, steeped in blushes, and with large tears swelling in her eyes, in the deep bay of a library window, where she looked in the midst of the heavy, dark frame-work of carved oak, like one of Guido's angels. "Surely, when I give you my son, I may also be allowed to offer you a few flounces and furbelows!"

"But, indeed, my dear sir!——"

"But, indeed, my dear young lady, I must have my way! Mary has set her heart upon it, and I will not consent that there shall be the difference of a knot of ribbon between you. Do you not hear her every now and then whispering, 'Papa, I should like so and so?' or 'Papa, I *must* have such a thing?' And are you not both my daughters? I can have no more folly of this kind, Gertrude. Had you been wealthy, I must, I know, have allowed you to be as headstrong as the rest of your sex; but, as it is, I will not hear another word."

"And yet, for that very reason, dear Mr. Armstrong,

I must entreat of you to let me speak. Do you know that even now—now, at this very instant—when you are not only endeavouring to hasten my marriage with your son—I, a poor, penniless orphan, who can only repay your generosity by the gratitude of a true heart and the tribute of a sincere affection—but are even urging me to share the luxuries which, although they may be the birth-right of Mary, are all too costly for a portionless bride like myself—do you know, that even now—” and, as she continued speaking she had gradually approached the old gentleman, until at last she was leaning over his high-backed chair, her arm upon his shoulder, and her golden hair mingling with the grey and glistening locks which clustered over his benevolent-looking head, “I feel as though all this happiness must be a dream; and I start at every sudden noise, lest I should awake only to find myself once more alone and unloved.”

“Silly child!” said the old man, in a voice that trembled somewhat more than usual, as he drew her towards him, and pressed his lips to her glowing cheek.

“Suffer me, therefore, I implore you, to return to my humble home until the period of—of this double marriage. I have already, in my selfish happiness, too much neglected the benevolent relative to whom I am indebted for all that I possess, and all that I am taught to hope. Let me for three short weeks endeavour to prove that the joy of my heart does not extinguish its affection.”

“What you ask is only fair, Gertrude, if you really wish it,” said Mr. Armstrong, reluctantly; “but I very much doubt it if either Ernest or his mother will consent to such a sacrifice. As for me, I confess that, between man and man, (if I may use such an expression where an old woman is concerned), I think you are right.”

“I knew you would, sir; for you are always alike just and generous; and therefore I may now calculate upon your support upon this point, for which I am really anxious.”

“Well, well, I have not the heart to contradict you any longer,” said the Squire; “so, if you can convince the women, I will not interfere further in the matter; but, I warn you, that they are likely to prove less ductile in your hands than I have done.”

Enchanted by her success, Gertrude warmly thanked the affectionate old man, and hastened to the breakfast-room, where the ladies of the family were busily discussing the merits of Lyons satins, Lisle laces, and orange-blossoms. A general exclamation greeted her entrance. Mary's taste was at issue with that of the London dressmaker, to whom Mrs. Armstrong bowed with implicit confidence, and it had just been decided that the question should be referred to Miss Mortimer.

"Now, am I not right, dear Gertrude?" eagerly asked the other bride elect; "will not our dresses be infinitely more graceful if entirely composed of lace than if we merely trim them, and leave the glossy, glarish satin unsubdued? And shall you not prefer a long veil of this delicious point to an odious bonnet?"

"The lace robe and the veil by all means, love," replied Gertrude, with a quiet smile; "like you, I shrink from the glare of satin by sun-light, but, unlike you, I shall neither venture upon the one nor the other."

"What can you mean?" exclaimed both sisters with surprise. "Has it not been already arranged that the two dresses are to be precisely similar?"

"It *was* so arranged, I know," said Gertrude, as she raised the hand of Mrs. Armstrong to her lips, "and grateful, very grateful, do I feel for the affection which could prompt such a proposal; but, within the last half-hour, I have induced Mr. Armstrong to rescind his resolution."

"How very unkind of papa!" said Mary, with a pretty pout. "Our party will not look half so picturesque; and that is not the worst of it, for I know you so well, Gertrude, that I am quite sure of your motive for this silly whim. But, mark me, I will not stand at the altar with you if you are dressed one whit worse than myself."

The orphan laughed as she silenced the threat with a sisterly kiss. "Do not fear, dear girl," she said, quietly; "you have, as yet, no idea of my heaped-up riches; and, moreover, I warn you that I shall pride myself more upon my dress that day than were it composed of lace like cobwebs, or thrice-piled velvet."

"What is it, then, Gertrude?" inquired Mrs. Armstrong, anxiously.

"It is the work of my own hands, my dear madam. Simple, very simple in its materials, but rendered somewhat costly by the labour which has been bestowed upon it. Let us, however, rather talk of dear Mary's toilette."

"Ernest will be bitterly disappointed when he finds that you have overthrown our plans, Gertrude," said Eleanor, reproachfully.

"And so am I," observed the old lady, "for now, you see, you have upset everything."

"I am afraid that you will, indeed, be inclined to think so, my dear madam," replied the orphan, "when I tell you that this is not the only concession which I have induced your kind husband to make. A certain feeling of remorse has reminded me that I owe a debt of gratitude and courtesy to my aunt, and that I cannot better pay it than by devoting to her comfort and amusement the three brief weeks which still remain before——"

"Oh! no, no, Gertrude!" was the general exclamation. "Ernest will never consent; and, moreover, only consider that, should you persist, there is an end at once to all our consultations, all our plans. Miss Warrington cannot want you, and will only be annoyed by the perpetual intrusion to which such an arrangement would subject her. No, no. We will yield the first point if you will give up the second."

"As Mr. Armstrong has consented," said the old lady, "to this arrangement, my dears, I think that Gertrude is quite right; for, after all, her poor old aunt must miss her even more than we do; and so, if she can persuade Ernest to allow it, I must desire that you will not say another word upon the subject."

And Gertrude did succeed, although with considerable difficulty, in convincing her lover, after having been compelled to hear him utter certain comments upon old women, which were anything but complimentary, and their last evening at the Manor-house was considerably saddened by the consciousness that they should not, for some time to come, again enjoy that solitary communion in which they had latterly indulged.

"Nevertheless, rebel as you are," said Ernest, with a smile, "I will indulge you with one more evening saunter through the grounds; so, throw on your bonnet

and shawl, and we will stroll until the dews force us in again."

And then it was, as they wandered through the rich shrubberies, and seated themselves for a time in the pavilion so dear to both, that the orphan, for the last time, poured forth all the feelings of her pure heart to the man who was so soon to become her husband, and listened with a happy smile to the rebuke with which he met her earnestly-expressed regrets that she should bring him no better dowry than her love.

"I ask, I care for nothing more, Gertrude," he replied, in an accent which carried conviction to her mind. "In possessing you I shall possess all that I have ever coveted on earth; but when once you are mine, I shall become more ambitious for your sake. Nor do I doubt that, by exerting proper means, I shall succeed in leaving you no such cause of regret. I have already a project, and had you been less unselfish than you are, or could I have made up my mind as demurely as you have done to a temporary separation, I might already have taken some steps towards its accomplishment."

Gertrude answered by an affectionate smile.

"And your project, dear Ernest?"

"Is a secret, fair lady, at present; but I will, nevertheless, be generous enough to confide to you one of its earliest results should it prove successful. You remember that lovely little retreat which we drove past a few days ago, Gertrude, half cottage and half villa, with its dainty pleasure-grounds and miniature lake? I covet that smiling abode as our home. But I have said nothing on the subject to my father, who would, as I well know, strain every nerve to gratify me while it remains in the market, for Mary's portion must be paid; and I am aware that he could not, without inconvenience, meet so large a demand upon his means at this particular moment; so that all I can do is to trust that it will not find a purchaser until I am prepared to make it mine."

"And had I not been penniless you might at once have accomplished your wish," said Gertrude, sadly.

"Now, fie upon you!" exclaimed Ernest, "thus to steal my secret from me, and then to repay me by outraging the delicacy of my affection. One more such

regret, Gertrude, and I shall begin to fear that you have not a proper confidence in my love."

"Rather, then, will I be grateful for the poverty which has left you without one doubt," replied the happy girl, as she wiped away the tears which had started to her eyes, "and henceforward I will speak and act as though I were a rich heiress, and privileged to indulge in every species of extravagance. Will that promise satisfy your exacting nature?"

But often, very often, when she found herself once more domesticated beneath the narrow roof of her aunt, did the conversation of that evening recur to her, and never without a pang. Of Ernest's affection she was assured, nor did she fear that even poverty could weaken it; but still she wept over the sacrifices to which he had compelled himself for her sake, and bitterly felt her utter helplessness to lessen them. She was indeed about to give herself to him, a portionless bride, for even the bequest of Mrs. Mortimer she no longer felt to be her own; and it had already been arranged by Ernest that it should be transferred to Miss Warrington as a tribute of gratitude for the kindness which she had shown to the orphan in her hour of need.

It was fortunate for Gertrude that the daily letters of her happy and sanguine lover, overflowing as they were with affection and gladness, and the occupation with which they necessarily provided her, tended to rouse her mind from the morbid state into which it might otherwise have fallen; while the half-playful and half-serious reproaches of his sisters, who found it difficult to forgive her desertion at such a moment, assisted in no slight degree to reconcile her to herself. They declared that everything had gone wrong since she left the Manor-house; that they could come to no decision upon any point without her assistance; and they even endeavoured to enlist Miss Warrington in their cause. The rigid old lady, however, proved impracticable, and laid so much stress upon the propriety of her niece remaining under her roof until the very eve of her marriage, that they rather lost ground than gained it, and were compelled once more to submit.

On the tenth morning after her return to Bletchley

two letters instead of one were, to the surprise of Gertrude, put into her hand. For a moment her heart beat quickly: it must be from Frederic, and, after all, she was not quite forgotten. But, no; a single glance sufficed; the writing was not his, and the mysterious missive bore the London post-mark. She had a faint idea that she recognised the somewhat quaint and crabbed characters of the superscription, but she could not identify them; and in another instant she laid the letter down, merely marvelling who could have written to her, and soon altogether forgetting the circumstance as she greedily devoured the contents of Ernest's far more interesting epistle.

Even the letter of a lover, however, comes to an end at last, and Gertrude had no sooner for the second time arrived at the conclusion of the three closely-written pages which composed that of Ernest, than she once more remembered the still unopened packet upon the table. These were its contents:—

“DEAR NIECE,—

“MY physician informed me yesterday that I am dying; and I felt so perfectly satisfied that he was right that I at once dismissed him, as it is useless to throw money away which is certain to be lost, both principal and interest. I am aware that the fact of an old man's death can be of little consequence to you, and therefore it is only as the brother of your mother that I now write to tell you that, after having lived for so many years alone, I am weak enough to desire not to die alone. I have no relation upon earth but you, or I would not have troubled you upon such an occasion. I enclose you a 5*l.* note. If you consent to come to me it will pay the expenses of your journey; and if you do not, you may keep it to buy a black gown, if you think proper to wear one when I am gone, out of respect to your mother's memory. If you *do* come, you must come at once, or you may be too late. I give you the address of my late office: when you reach town drive there, and they will send a clerk with you to my house, as you might not be able to find it

“Your uncle and well-wisher,

“WILLIAM SPENCER.”

The agitation of Gertrude was excessive as she rapidly perused the letter of her obdurate relative, but not for a single instant did she hesitate as to the line of conduct she should pursue. She had not, moreover, a moment to lose; the coach by which she had formerly reached Bletchley only made its London-ward journey twice within the week, and was to leave that very day at noon. Hurriedly, therefore, she detailed to Miss Warrington the emergency in which she found herself; and, after writing a brief note of regret and explanation to the ladies of the Manor-house, hastily threw together a few indispensable articles of apparel, and aided by the energy of Hannah, found herself at eleven o'clock traversing the well-known meadows, accompanied by a stout lad bearing her portmanteau and carpet-bag, precisely as she had done on the previous occasion.

Yes, thus alone and unattended, save by a fustian-clad village boy, did the future mistress of the Manor-house set forth upon her second melancholy journey, leaving behind her smiling lips and loving hearts, to encounter at best a very uncertain welcome, and to assist once more at the melancholy spectacle of a death-bed. She reached the road-side inn, paid the modest fee of her impromptu page, and then, in a large, bleak, chilly room, whose sanded floor, rude chairs, empty grate, and beer-stained table combined to form the very acme of discomfort, sat down to await the departure of the coach, and for the first time to reflect.

Her thoughts naturally turned on the probable displeasure of Ernest when he should learn not only the fact, but also the manner, of her departure; she felt that his pride would be wounded, and his fears excited, by her solitary pilgrimage, but still she did not repent the step which she had taken. The brother of her mother, however harshly he might have acted towards her, had a claim upon her respect and obedience which she dared not neglect; and, even amid the terror of the present and her dread of the future, she experienced something akin to joy as she remembered that she had still a second relative by whom she was not utterly cast off, and to whom she might even yet prove a source of consolation and comfort.

At length, after much preparatory bustle, the dragging of trunks and packages along the stone passages, the loud laughter and louder oaths of a score of idlers and hangers-on, the horses were put-to, and, to her great delight, she found herself, on entering the coach, in the presence of a single fellow-traveller, a comely woman of sixty, who, after having uttered a courteous and respectful "good-day" to her new companion, attempted no further conversation, and thus once more left the anxious girl to her own thoughts.

CHAPTER XL.

NEVERTHELESS the journey was a dreary one, and well calculated to oppress the already-saddened heart of Gertrude, while the arrival in town, and in the heart of the city, in the midst of a twilight deepened by fog, was rendered still more terrifying to a novice like Gertrude by the noise of many voices and the tread of many feet.

A hackney-coach was, however, soon procured, and ere long the orphan, with her slender luggage, was on her way to the office to which she had been directed by the letter of her uncle. Hitherto she had borne up bravely; but this last slow and melancholy, and, to her, mysterious progress through narrow streets, where the dim lamps failed to throw more than a sickly beam upon the dirt-obsured, and often iron-barred windows of the lofty and frowning houses, totally exhausted her courage.

Nor was her situation apparently much improved when, at length, the cumbrous coach drew up beside the narrow pavement of what appeared to be a squalid lane, and, at the summons of the coachman, a door was opened by a slipshod woman, whose uncombed hair fell in revolting confusion about her face, and who held in her hand an unsnuffed candle, which flared and guttered under the action of the chill wind.

The heart of the orphan sank within her as she felt convinced that this could not be the haven she had sought, and, for an instant, she was crushed by the con-

viction of her forlorn and helpless situation, thus utterly alone in the streets of a great city, amid damp and darkness; but she was soon relieved from this new terror by the approach of the slatternly portress, who, advancing to the side of the carriage, dropped a curtsy, and inquired if Miss would be pleased to walk in, adding, that she had just come in time, as Mr. Jackson had already locked all up, and was preparing to go home.

"No, no, I thank you," was the quick rejoinder of Gertrude; "I have not a moment to lose. If it be, as I suppose, Mr. Jackson who is to be good enough to accompany me to my uncle's, have the kindness to tell him that I am ready to proceed at once."

The woman withdrew into the house, and, at the termination of a few minutes, she reappeared, accompanied by a diminutive man, of careworn and haggard countenance, who, as he emerged from the dingy passage, was hastily buttoning a shabby and insufficient great-coat over a huge bunch of keys. By the light of a flaring candle he accosted Gertrude with a courtesy which was almost obsequious; and, on her reiterating her wish to avoid all further delay, made a quiet bow, and mounted the box beside the coachman.

The poor girl was entirely ignorant whither she was now proceeding, and she had ample opportunity to reflect upon the discomforts of her position ere they arrived in a narrow street at Walworth, which was their place of destination. Here they once more stopped; and the active clerk, having hastily descended from his unenviable eminence, and cautiously knocked at the door, announced to Gertrude that she had now reached her uncle's house.

It had by this time become so dark that, owing to the absence of street lamps, which, as it appeared, were a luxury almost entirely dispensed with in that immediate neighbourhood, the excited and wearied traveller could form no judgment as to the description of residence selected by her uncle; but she did not long remain in doubt, for once more a door was opened to her, and again a female stood upon the threshold, candle in hand, to inquire her business. To this question Mr. Jackson immediately replied in a low, and somewhat deferential tone; after which, he himself opened the coach-door,

took possession of the portmanteau and carpet-bag, which he was compelled to deposit in a front room in order that the young lady might be enabled to pass into the house; and then, while the neat and matronly person who had given them entrance was respectfully ushering her into the same apartment, he advanced, hat in hand, to inquire if he should discharge the coach. Totally unaccustomed to all such arrangements Gertrude eagerly and thankfully put her purse into his hand; and while she was making hurried and whispered inquiries as to the state of her uncle, she was once more startled by the sound of a fierce contention without.

"Don't be alarmed, ma'am," said the good woman with a smile, as even by the faint light which she carried she saw the cheek of the orphan turn pale, "it is only Mr. Jackson settling with the Jarvey. They are such rogues, that he has been trying to cheat you, as a matter of course, but for once he has met with his match; he must look sharper than ever he did in his life before, if he imposes on Mr. Jackson."

"Oh, I entreat you, give him anything—all that he asks. That outcry will disturb Mr. Spencer."

"Oh, no, ma'am," was the quiet rejoinder, "I don't think my master will hear it; but, if he does, it will do him good. He will be so glad to know that you have not thrown away your money."

The heart of the orphan sank within her; she knew not how to reply to such an assurance; and involuntarily she glanced round the squalid room in which she stood, as if to read in its arrangements some token of its owner's habits. The survey was soon completed. Fire there was none; and the discoloured shavings which filled the grate afforded ready evidence that they had long remained undisturbed; a small and well-worn carpet partially covered the floor; and half a dozen rush-seated chairs assisted in concealing the remaining portion of the boards; a small round table, furnished with an office inkstand, a few pens, and a torn blotting-book, stood in the centre; and the walls boasted, for all ornament, a folio sheet-almanack fastened to the faded paper by four pins, immediately above the chimney-piece.

Gertrude had already been initiated into the discom-

forts of genteel penury ; but on her arrival at Bletchley she had believed that the home of Miss Warrington was an extreme example of its class ; while now she had only to look round her to be convinced, that even by her last change of residence she had left, not merely positive comfort, but almost luxury behind her.

In an instant the conviction flashed upon her mind, that the helpless old man who had so unexpectedly summoned her to his bed of death had been ruined by one of those hazardous speculations in which he had formerly amassed considerable wealth ; and the question trembled upon her tongue, when it was arrested by the re-entrance of Mr. Jackson, upon whose hollow cheek the excitement of his late contention had almost brought a flush, and who smiled a smile of genuine complacency as he restored the purse of Miss Mortimer, assuring her that he had succeeded so thoroughly, that the rascally coachman had not carried off a farthing more than his fare. It was evident, by his crest-fallen look, as Gertrude answered only by a silent bend of the head, that he had anticipated both thanks and congratulations upon his victory ; but he once more became radiant as she placed the last remaining guinea of Mr. Spencer's gift in his hand, and assured him, in her gentlest accents, that she would not fail to inform her uncle how greatly she was indebted to his care.

When he took his leave, the female attendant, after apologising to her new inmate for leaving her in the dark for a few instants, as she had no other candle, bolted and barred the door of the house as carefully as though it had closed over the entrance of the jewel-cave of Aladdin ; and then, hastily returning, deposited the light upon the table, and, at the request of Gertrude, went to inform the sick man of her arrival.

Again the orphan looked around her in utter sadness. It must be as she had guessed ; and the rich relative who had abandoned his family because he could not endure to share his wealth with them, had lived to see it melt away into absolute penury, and perhaps to die amid privation and regret. And then another thought flashed upon her. Miss Warrington as yet knew nothing of the generous intentions of Ernest in her behalf, and consequently she

should commit no injustice if she proposed to him to divide Mrs. Mortimer's bequest between her aunt and the equally needy brother of her mother. It was little, as she sorrowfully felt, to offer to either; and thus divided, became even less worthy of their acceptance; but it was her all, and it would suffice to convince them that she was not selfishly indifferent to their welfare.

Feeling more happy than she had done since she left Bletchley, Gertrude rose from her seat, and was disencumbering herself of her heavy travelling cloak, when the servant reappeared, and offered to conduct her to the chamber of her uncle, who was prepared to see her.

Overcome by fatigue and anxiety, the orphan felt her knees tremble as she preceded the woman up a narrow and uncarpeted flight of stairs, and then paused beside a door which stood partially open.

"Walk in, ma'am, if you please," was whispered in her ear; "that's master's room."

And Gertrude obeyed.

The same solitary candle by which she had been received on her arrival still lent its friendly light, which, faint though it was, enabled her to discover every detail of the closet-like apartment of the dying man. One of those odious inventions called fire-baskets stood in the grate, where a feeble flame was flickering beneath a suffocating clump of coke; a table of unpainted deal was drawn near the hearth with a chair beside it, and upon it stood a spoutless jug and a glass tumbler. A large hair trunk, which had evidently long afforded a banquet to the moths, supplied the place of drawers; and a comfortless tent-bedstead, with curtains so scanty that they refused to meet on either side, occupied the upper end of the room, and partially obscured the window.

Upon this squalid bed lay the worshipper of Mammon, beneath a thin and sullied coverlet; one hand under his head, which was only protected from the chill night air by a profusion of snow-white hair which fell over the pillow, and the other resting upon a walking-cane, that had evidently been left purposely within his reach.

"So you are come, are you?" growled a voice, which would have been harsh had not weakness rendered it feeble, as Gertrude moved noiselessly across the floor;

"thank you for that at least;" and the bony fingers quitted for an instant the head of the cane, and were extended to her as she reached the bed-side; "come to see me die—not in a palace—not in a palace, as perhaps you expected; but like an honest man, under a quiet roof, never disturbed by debts or duns."

"Do not despair, sir," said Gertrude softly; "you require care, and I am very grateful to you for having given me the opportunity of becoming your nurse. Young as I am, I am no stranger to a sick-room."

"All the better—all the better," was the ungracious rejoinder; "no woman has a right to be so. But sit down, sit down; why do you stand?"

Gertrude possessed herself of the solitary chair, and placed it near the sick man's pillow.

"And you, Mrs. Sharp," continued the invalid in the same low growl, "go and arrange Miss Mortimer's room. Have you borrowed a bolster, as I told you?"

"Yes, sir," replied the woman with a slight blush.

"Very well, go then; take the candle with you. We can talk as well in the dark."

Mrs. Sharp curtseyed in silence, took up the brass candlestick, and disappeared. Gertrude remained in darkness with her scarce seen and dreaded relative.

"And now tell me—tell me," whispered the sick man, when they were thus alone together; "tell me, niece, what has your journey cost you?"

"Your generosity, sir, more than supplied my wants."

"Yes, yes; you could not spend five pounds in coming here, unless you sowed silver by the roadside, that it might bring forth gold. London was the trial, child; London, I know it. I have lived in London, boy and man, for sixty years, and now and then they have tried to cheat me. *Tried*—do you mark me?—tried, but never succeeded!" And through the darkness sounded a low chuckle, as the sick man turned his head abruptly upon the pillow. "I protected you against the tricks of London, when I put you under the care of Jackson—Jackson is as keen as a file, but has never had wit enough to make his fortune. He was too weak to grapple with the world, and to hold what he had clutched. It requires wit—ay, and wisdom too—when a man has once become

rich to enable him to remain so, and not suffer his honest gains to escape him ;” and full of the image which he had conjured up, the wretched mammon-lover raised his bony arm in the air, and unclosing his clenched hand, spread wide his attenuated fingers, as though a shower of gold-dust were evaporating from between them.

The poor girl shrank before this sudden burst of factitious energy, although its most hideous feature was spared to her by the obscurity around them ; and anxious to evade all reply to such an observation, she said timidly—

“ You were speaking of Mr. Jackson, sir.”

“ True,” was the prompt reply, as her uncle once more relapsed into sudden calm ; “ it is idle to talk to you of what you cannot understand. I was talking of Jackson ; telling you that he had been a fool, who never knew how to avail himself of his natural capabilities. But, by the by, what’s your name, child ? I have forgotten.”

“ Gertrude, sir,” said the poor girl, almost choked by tears.

“ Ah, yes, Gertrude, I remember now ; your mother was fond of novel-reading, and found the name there, no doubt ; but no matter. I say, Gertrude, you did not give Jackson anything, I hope ? He’s in constant employment ; sixty pounds a year, and only four children. With proper management, sixty pounds a year will go a great way ; and when there are no appearances to keep up—and what appearance can be expected from the junior clerk of a mercantile house ?—it is a very comfortable income.”

Gertrude made no reply.

“ And so Mrs. Mortimer left you £2000, child ?” pursued the sinking gold-worshipper ; “ £2000 !! Do you know that millions have been made out of the fiftieth part of £2000 ? And what have you done with such a sum of money ?”

“ Will you forgive me, my dear sir, if I venture to tell you what I should rejoice in doing with a part of it ?”

“ Oh, then, it is not all gone !” said the eager voice, as the bony fingers again expanded themselves, and sought in darkness for the hand of Gertrude, which they clasped

in their skeleton pressure ; “then it is not all gone ! And I may live long enough to get you good interest for it—unquestionable security—you may trust me. But be saving, Gertrude ; be saving. ‘Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves, as poor Richard says.’ But what do you want to do with part of it, child ? What can you know about money-matters. What nonsense have you got into your silly woman’s head ?”

“I scarcely know how to tell you, sir ; but I had better confess that when I received your letter I believed you to be living in affluence, if not in splendour.”

“I dare be sworn you did !” growled out the harsh voice, and the clasp of the withered hand was suddenly withdrawn.

“That idea alone,” pursued the orphan undismayed by the effect of her frank confession, “made me hesitate for a moment in obeying your summons, for I felt that where you could command every comfort and every care my presence would avail but little, while there were circumstances which rendered me anxious not to abandon my home at this particular crisis. Now, however, I am indeed grateful that I stifled the voice of my selfishness, for since I entered your house I feel that I may not be utterly useless—that I may be enabled to act towards you the part of a child—and that, with your permission, I may in a slight, although unfortunately a very slight degree, repair the injustice of that fortune which I am painfully aware has deserted you at the very moment when its favours were the most needed.”

“And what can you give me, should I live ?” murmured the dying man, even more huskily than he had yet spoken.

“Little, too little, I fear, to secure to you all the comforts of existence,” replied Gertrude sadly ; “but still enough to protect you from want.”

“And what do you propose to live upon yourself ?”

The orphan blushed, although all was dark about her. “I should, perhaps, already have explained to you, my dear sir,” she almost whispered, “that I am about to become a wife.”

“The wife of whom, Gertrude Mortimer ?” loudly de-

manded the sick man, aroused into violent although transitory energy: "beware how you suffer yourself to forget that, although an almost penniless orphan, you are the daughter of my sister."

"I do not shrink before the warning," was the proud reply; "I am betrothed to the only son of Mr. Armstrong, of Bletchley House."

Although Gertrude could not see the action, she could hear the dry and fevered palms of the invalid clasp together, and something like a laugh mingle with the hard and labouring cough which ploughed his chest.

"And so," he said at length, "you can help me to live? and I have toiled for years only to be indebted at last to a puny and love-sick girl, who is ignorant of the value of what she gives up so readily! But I am glad that you are to marry an Armstrong, child; very glad. I know their history—part of it is written in bonds and post-obits—but better days are coming for the Armstrongs, better days; and again I say that I am glad of it. Gold is like the loadstone, girl; only it acts and reacts upon itself. Gold loves gold, child. The sight of it is pleasant; the ring of it is sonorous; the weight of it is satisfactory: the man who has once possessed gold, good sterling gold, knows its real value, and cannot be cheated by a counterfeit. To him it is food and fuel, home, and wife, and children, costly raiment, and proud station. If you could raise again the walls and palaces of Tyre and Sidon, and Carthage and Palmyra, do you know what all their stones would cry aloud in honour of their resurrection? Nothing but Gold!" And the dying man sank back, panting and exhausted, upon his pillow.

Gertrude felt very wretched. Here lay beside her a worshipper of Mammon, evidently excluded from the sordid temple of his cherished deity at the eleventh hour; and yet so fearfully imbued with the one and only idolatry of a long life, that he could not divest himself of his old and now worse than idle associations.

CHAPTER XLI.

"AND now tell me, child," pursued the wretched man, after a pause, "have you brought money enough with you to take you home when all is over here? You had better go back at once when I am gone, for London is a sad place, a very sad place, fit only for those who do not know the value of what they squander. Are you provided with money to take you back?"

"I am, sir," said Gertrude, more and more saddened by the conviction that her uncle could converse upon no other than his one darling theme; "and, indeed, I blush to have already intruded so greatly upon your generosity."

"That is right," replied the gold-worshipper, evidently much relieved by the assurance; "and now, while we are alone, let me tell you at once that here, in a pocket-book under my pillow, you will find a £20 note. That is to bury me, child. A sad waste of money, when, after all, we need only a few planks nailed together, and a deep hole dug to hide us away in; but we all have our weaknesses, and I wish to be put into the ground like a gentleman. So it must *all* be spent; do you hear me, Gertrude? *ALL*—that I may have the satisfaction of knowing that the thing was done handsomely. Jackson will follow me, and it will be a fine day's work for him; the scarf, and hatband, and gloves, will be a little fortune, for I know well from experience that they can be turned to good account. He will have earned them, however, for I have given directions that he shall come here and arrange everything. I cannot depend on you; they would rob and cheat you on all hands; while Jackson knows the world, and trusts it as little as I do. Nevertheless, make him show you the account. Twenty pounds is a large sum to expend at once and a great deal ought to be done with it."

"I will endeavour to follow all your directions, sir; but would it not also be prudent to make some arrangements in contemplation of a happier result to your illness than

you appear to anticipate? These gloomy forebodings can only tend to aggravate your sufferings."

"Gloomy forebodings!" echoed the old man in a tone of sarcastic indignation, "who has told you that I have any gloomy forebodings? Do you suppose that I am afraid to die?"

"I sincerely trust not, sir."

"Well, then, you may be at ease upon that point. Afraid to die! Pshaw! the very idea is sickening. What have I left to live for? Are you not aware that I have been compelled to give up business; and that I am indebted, even for the services of Jackson, to the courtesy of my successor?"

"I had indeed suspected, on my arrival here, that such was probably the case."

"You are a shrewd observer it seems, girl; and yet you fancy that I am afraid to die. What is the world to me now, when I have nothing left to do in it? However, if I should live, it appears that you have provided for my wants;" and again the exulting chuckle was faintly audible; "but never fear, never fear; all is nearly over with me, and I shall not burden you long."

"You do me injustice, sir, if you suppose——"

"I suppose nothing, child; I am a man of facts—honest, straightforward, plain facts. My whole life has been one fact—one dry, hard fact—one palpable and tangible principle."

"I was only about to assure you, sir——"

"You had already done better, girl, you had offered me money, which will go farther than all the assurances in the world; and I hate sentiment."

Fortunately for Gertrude the staid attendant of her uncle entered as he ceased speaking, and thus obviated the necessity of any reply. After having carefully deposited her candle upon the table, she knelt down, and with a piece of stout iron-wire attempted to stir into something like a blaze the dull and cheerless handful of fuel in the wretched fireplace; but, even cautious as she was, the noise grated upon the ear of the sick man; who, drawing aside the miserable apology for a curtain which veiled the head of his bed, exclaimed eagerly—

"Gently, Mrs. Sharp, gently. How often have I told

you that coals are the precious jewels of the people? It is by no means cold; by no means cold," he repeated, as he withdrew his arm under the scanty coverlid when the chill air of the little chamber fell upon it; "and coals are dear, very dear, this winter."

"It is the nasty coke, sir, that will not catch," said the housekeeper in a tone of respectful remonstrance.

"All the better, Mrs. Sharp, all the better," was the tart rejoinder. "Half the fires that take place in London are occasioned by that injudicious use of the poker which appears to be an epidemic with your sex. Let the coke alone; it crackles and burns away gently, and nothing more is necessary. And now, what have you to give Miss Mortimer? She may, perhaps, be hungry after her journey."

"We have a cold mutton-chop in the house, sir."

"Good, good; nothing is so wholesome as mutton; and cold meat after fatigue is always preferable to hot. Go and sup, child; and then let me see you again."

"I thank you, my dear sir," said the unhappy Gertrude, "but I have no appetite."

"All the better," said the sick man with a smile; "all the better. Meat is heavy at night, and might spoil your rest. Do as you please, my dear; do as you please. Mrs. Sharp will obey your orders. And now give me some water, Mrs. Sharp, I am thirsty."

"Water, sir!" exclaimed Gertrude earnestly; "surely you will not run the risk of drinking water in your present weak state!"

The miserable invalid made no reply until the quiet matron had poured a glass of water from the dilapidated jug, and placed it in his hand; then, after having swallowed a portion of its contents, he said ironically, "And why should I not drink water? Is it not the natural beverage bestowed upon us by nature? Beer is privileged poison; tea is costly; and I have a pump in my yard, child, for which I have already paid a tax. Why should I not drink water?"

"I would entreat for myself, however, a cup of tea," said Gertrude, who could no longer repress her tears, "for I begin to feel that I am utterly exhausted."

"Do you hear, Mrs. Sharp?" asked the sick man

peevishly. "Miss Mortimer wishes for tea; and, as that is the case, you may bring me some also; but coffee is cheaper, coffee is cheaper."

"Coffee will be equally acceptable to me, my dear sir," gasped Gertrude.

"Mrs. Sharp! Mrs. Sharp!" almost screamed the wretched sufferer from his squalid bed; for the delighted attendant had hurried from the room, carrying off with her once more the solitary candle, and had already reached the head of the stairs, "Miss Mortimer will take coffee. Measure it carefully; for should I get well again (and there is no knowing what may occur) I shall not overlook any waste. Miss Mortimer will take coffee; and, perhaps, some bread and butter."

The female functionary replied by the conventional "Very well, sir," and rapidly descended the stairs, while the orphan, once more alone in the darkness with her unhappy relative, instead of pursuing the conversation, sat and retraced in her mind's eye every feature of the sharp thin face which lay upon the pillow beside her.

One glance had sufficed to show that in his youth Mr. Spencer must have been strikingly handsome. The outline of his features was regular and fine, although now pinched and meagre from disease, and she was almost tempted to add—from famine. A hectic circle burnt and glowed upon his cheek, but his forehead was as white as marble, his eyes encircled by a dark ring, and his narrow lips parched and livid. The expression of his eye was half-cunning and half-suspicious, and betrayed a nature which his silence might otherwise have concealed; while the continued clutching of his fingers, fastening as it seemed upon some visionary treasure, and the continued restlessness visible in his whole person, told that the spirit within was ill at ease.

The silence was soon broken by the sick man, to whom a moment's quiet appeared burdensome; but it was evident that he was greatly weakened by the exertion of the past hour.

"You will soon have some amusement, child," he said, as he turned his head heavily towards her. "The paper will be here in a short time; I cannot live without a paper, and I get it cheap from a neighbour by waiting

till the evening. All I shall ask you to read to me is the city article; I care nothing about politics or Old Bailey reports. The money market is the only market worth watching; and when you have read that, you can follow your own fancy as to the rest. But you must be quick, for they call for it again in half-an-hour. I made that arrangement with them," he added, dropping his voice still lower, until it sunk into a confidential whisper, "to prevent Mrs. Sharp from sitting up to read, and burning the candle to waste; for Mrs. Sharp has had an education, and used to bring books and read while she sat by my bedside. Books, indeed! when she might have been repairing my linen, or washing my clothes. I soon sent the books out of the house;" and the wretched man laughed once more his low, bitter, and heartless laugh.

The coffee was soon afterwards announced, and, at the bidding of her uncle, Gertrude rose and followed the servant downstairs, once more leaving him in the darkness and alone. She was miserable, but she feared to betray all the bitterness of her feelings before a stranger and a menial, and consequently she repressed her tears, and seated herself at the tea-table with one of those forced smiles which are infinitely more painful to witness than any burst of grief.

Comfortless indeed was the meal prepared for the wearied and exhausted girl; but she eagerly accepted the steaming coffee which was offered to her, and even endeavoured to compel herself to partake of the uninviting bread which was its accompaniment. This last effort proved, however, beyond her strength, and a thick sob arrested the unpalatable morsel ere she could swallow it.

"Let it come, ma'am, let it come," said the sympathising woman who stood beside her; "it will do you good to cry; and well you may, poor lady. Do not try to stop your tears, you will be better able to bear up afterwards; and I shall be no restraint upon you, for I am going to take my master his cup of coffee. I must water it a little first, however," continued the worthy Mrs. Sharp, as if speaking to herself, "or the poor gentleman will fancy that he is going to the workhouse;" and, taking the kettle from the hob on which she had placed it, although there was no fire in the grate, she half-filled it with water, and

then, adding the coffee, disappeared steadily in the darkness as if long habit had rendered her independent of such a consideration.

And when she was once more alone Gertrude wept indeed. For a time the smiling future which was beckoning her on was utterly forgotten, and she lived only in the cheerless present. She cared not for the poverty of her uncle; she would not have shrunk from any privations; but his narrow and sordid spirit crushed her to the very earth.

The orphan felt her fearful responsibility; she felt how much and so solemnly it behoved her to awaken him to a better and a more befitting state of mind, but she could not conceal from herself all the difficulty of her task. How was she to enforce the necessity of a higher and a holier worship upon one who, like the epileptic maniac, saw everything tinged with the yellow hue of gold? And yet the effort must be made. She must not suffer him, because he had lost his all in this world, blindly to put from him the promises of the world to come; and therefore humbly, and with a deep sense of her own incapacity, she resolved to make an attempt to inspire him with higher and holier hopes.

Poor Gertrude! She had yet to learn that avarice is in itself a religion, and that when once it has fixed its fiery clutch upon the human heart, that heart is evermore preyed upon by the one demon-flame; and the fearful tragedy of the fabled Hall of Eblis is perpetually enacted upon earth. The idol, may, indeed, be consumed upon its shrine, but the infatuated worshipper will still kneel before the empty altar, and pour out his orisons to the memory of the vanished deity.

It was not long ere the attendant returned, and the orphan, having wiped away her tears, felt the presence of a fellow-being almost a relief. She, moreover, had some misgivings as to the remaining pecuniary resources of her uncle, which it was expedient either to confirm or to remove, in order that she might know how to act; and accordingly she determined to question the staid-looking woman who so quietly and resignedly served him, and thus to ascertain, if possible, the exact position of his affairs.

Having once arrived at this determination, she desired

Mrs. Sharp, on her reappearance, to reply frankly to her inquiries—a request with which the matron readily and respectfully complied.

“I believe my master to be a ruined man, ma’am,” she said, “although not actually destitute. I am the widow of one of his late clerks, and to me he has always been just, even if not generous; but he is less so to himself, and it has been with the greatest difficulty that I have induced him to take sufficient sustenance to preserve life. He cannot last long, and yet you see the wretchedness in which he is content to pass the last few weeks of his existence. Before he thought of inviting you here, ma’am, I ventured once or twice to propose to him that I should engage some young girl at low wages to do the drudgery of the house, in order that I might devote my time to him; but he resolutely refused; and I have been compelled, in consequence, to leave him hour after hour alone on his sick-bed. I should not have cared so much for this could he have rung me up when he required my services, but we have not a bell in the place; and although I substituted the cane which you must have seen near him, it has frequently happened that he has knocked upon the floor for several minutes before I heard him, and I have found him faint and exhausted from the exertion, and almost believed him for a moment to be dying.”

“But tell me, Mrs. Sharp, tell me honestly,” urged the unhappy Gertrude, “this state of almost starvation in which I find you, can it indeed be necessary?”

“I really cannot say, ma’am, but I am afraid so. As regards myself, Mr. Spencer has always paid my salary with the greatest punctuality; but I will not conceal from you that a portion of it has almost always been spent in purchasing trifles for his comfort, which I have been obliged to tell him were presents from my friends, or I do believe that he would have died long ago of actual starvation.”

The tears of Gertrude flowed afresh. “My poor uncle!” she sobbed out; “and yet he was once wealthy.”

“Yes, ma’am; and I have been even told very rich, although he never lived like a rich man; but after the death of my husband I saw little of him for some time, until he proposed to me that I should become his housekeeper—an

offer which, as I was totally dependent on my friends, I readily accepted."

"I thank you, Mrs. Sharp, for your candour," said the orphan; "and now we must act in concert, and endeavour to render his remnant of life more tolerable. My own resources are scanty, it is true, but they are sufficient for the purpose. Moreover, under the circumstances, I feel it a duty to expend upon his comfort the sum which he forwarded for my journey, and which must have made a cruel inroad upon his scanty means."

"I fear it did, ma'am, for the forwarding of that money delayed his letter for several days. He even shed tears as he folded it, declaring that should he die before you arrived, he should have ended his life by an act of folly; but now you are come, ma'am, all will be right, and he already seems more happy in his mind."

Thus instructed, Gertrude hastened to make sundry petty but well-judged arrangements, all tending to the comfort of the sick man, which the housekeeper gladly undertook to realise; and she was still involved in such considerations when a knock at the door summoned Mrs. Sharp to receive the paper, for which, as she remarked, her master must long have been anxiously looking out, from its unusual delay. Nor was she wrong in her conjecture, for she had scarcely returned to the parlour when the sound of the cane upon the uncarpeted floor of Mr. Spencer's room announced that he was aware of its arrival, and impatient for his daily luxury.

Gertrude accordingly took possession of the unsavoury journal, which, reeking with the smell of tobacco, and fouled by the touch of unwashed fingers, betrayed its tavern origin, and, followed by the housekeeper with the ubiquitous candle, hastened to the sick-room.

"Good girl, good girl," said the invalid, eagerly; "now come close to me, and read very slowly, that I may be able to understand you."

Gertrude was already repaid for her alacrity. The deal table was drawn nearer to the bed, and the candle placed upon it. The dying man raised himself upon the pillow, and an eager expression lighted his dim eyes for an instant. The hand which clutched the pocket-book still remained buried beneath his head; but the other,

relaxing its hold upon the cane, wandered over the bed-clothes, and the fingers occasionally traced with wonderful rapidity the figures announced by Gertrude as she read.

"Foreign securities commanded no great attention to-day," she commenced, carefully accentuating every syllable.

"Just as it should be," growled the listener; "'look at home' is the wisest motto."

"Consols began at 99 and left off at 101½."

"What's that? what's that?" asked her uncle, with sudden energy.

Gertrude repeated the quotation.

"Good, good," he murmured, almost inarticulately, "things are mending. I wish I had £100,000 to sell out."

Despite this species of running commentary, however, the orphan at length reached the termination of her dreary task; and declining the proposal of her host that she should continue the perusal of the inodorous sheet for her own private gratification, she ventured to urge her state of fatigue, and to request permission to retire to rest.

Nothing could be more consonant with the wishes of her uncle. Gertrude once withdrawn, Mrs. Sharp might also immediately follow, and the candle be extinguished. It was therefore with something like warmth that he bade her good night, and saw her retreat to the wretched and pillowless bed, upon which she no sooner threw herself than, exhausted both in mind and body, she laid her head upon the *borrowed bolster*, and sank into a deep and, happily, a dreamless sleep with the breath of prayer upon her lips.

CHAPTER XLII.

Nothing could exceed the annoyance of Mortimer, when, as he was one morning crossing the lawn, gun in hand, preparatory to a day's shooting, he was passed by a travelling chaise and four, in which he recognised Sir Horace

Trevor. Already dissatisfied with the circle which had assembled at his house, and wearied by the coquetry and frivolity of which he was a perpetual witness, he fairly lost his temper. He had always hated this man; and here he was once more bearding him under his own roof. Full of angry and impatient emotions, he forgot for a moment the errand upon which he had set forth, and plunged into the shrubbery, as if to shut out at once all sight of a home which had latterly become odious to him.

Suddenly the happy laughter of his child fell upon his ear; and, like the harp of David before Saul, it sufficed to restore him to composure. It was therefore almost with a smile that he hurried on, in order to embrace his darling; and still the loud and ringing sound of her artless mirth came buoyantly upon the breeze. It was yet early; and he assuredly was ill-prepared to encounter any one save the infant and its nurse, when at an abrupt turn in the path, he saw before him Mrs. Lamerly seated upon the grass under a sycamore, with her rich chestnut hair falling in showers about her, and his little girl busy in tangling the gleaming tresses with her fairy fingers.

Mortimer would have retreated, but the child had already heard his step, and, pausing for a moment in her sport, recognised him with a scream of delight. There was consequently no means of avoiding the encounter; and after the utterance of a brief greeting, and the expression of his surprise at finding his fair guest so early risen, he rested his gun against a tree at a little distance from the group, and threw himself down upon the turf beside them.

Despite his dislike of the coquettish widow, Mortimer could not remain altogether insensible to the kindness which she lavished upon his heart's idol; and on the present occasion she looked so extremely pretty amid the disorder produced by her indulgence to the child; the golden waves of her hair glimmered so brightly in the sunshine; her wrapping-gown of white muslin, designed so modestly, and yet so perfectly, the outline of her small but faultless figure; the little foot which, outstretched a few inches beyond the border of her dress, lay imbedded

in a rich frame-work of mossy turf, was so exquisitely minute and well-proportioned; her fair cheek was so softly flushed by her exertions; and her large eyes were so "darkly, deeply, beautifully blue," as she looked up at him, half in confusion and half in merriment, that he began to marvel how he could so long have remained insensible to her attractions.

"But where is Harris?" he asked, as the child, after having received and returned his caress, once more extended its little arms to its playfellow, and pursued its former amusement.

"Oh, we dispense with Mrs. Harris's attendance when we are bent upon a frolic, do we not, Eva?" lisped the ingenuous beauty, as she clasped the little girl to her breast, so suddenly as to cover the face of Mortimer for an instant with her long and perfumed tresses; "and we are not bound to tolerate even the intrusion of papa. We steal an hour in the morning before mamma or her friends have left their dressing-rooms, in order to be entirely alone; and it is too bad that our solitude should be invaded by gentlemen in leather gaiters and velvetreen jackets. We must select another play-ground, my pretty Eva."

"You are quite right, Mrs. Lamerly," said Mortimer, apologetically; "mine is certainly no attire in which to present myself before one of my wife's guests; but you will at once find my excuse in the fact that I could not possibly anticipate this meeting."

"Oh, you are quite forgiven," laughed the lady, as she affected to be anxious to gather together her scattered tresses; an attempt which was, however, frustrated by an impatient cry from the child; "for it must be confessed that I am somewhat in the same predicament, and not altogether in a presentable costume. We must therefore sign a mutual truce, and promise to behave more prettily in public."

"One of us, at least, will not succeed in *looking* more prettily," replied Mortimer, scarcely conscious of what he said, but inadvertently uttering his conviction at the moment, "and when I consider from how kind, how very kind a motive, you have suffered yourself thus to be surprised in your present picturesque state of disarray, I

should be ungrateful indeed were I not to appreciate all its attractions."

"Now, fie upon you for a flatterer, Mr. Mortimer," was the retort of the fair widow; "I shall really tell Sybil!"

"Tell Sybil!" repeated Frederic, between his clenched teeth, and a sarcastic smile hovered for an instant about his mouth, which, transient as it was, did not, nevertheless, escape the quick eye of his companion. "You were one of Sybil's earliest friends, and must be quite aware that I shall be easily forgiven."

"I can scarcely agree with you," said, or rather murmured Mrs. Lamerly, as she bent down and pressed her lips to the rosy cheek of the child, which, wearied at length with its sport, was falling to sleep upon her encircling arm; "even knowing what I know, I cannot believe it."

"And what *do* you know?" asked Frederic, abruptly.

"Oh, nothing; nothing, at least, which should bring such a scowl upon your brow. Sybil, as an unmarried woman, may have been fickle, capricious, perhaps even what the naughty, ill-natured world calls a coquette; but now, of course, all that is over."

"And so my fair Sybil was somewhat of a coquette in her youth, eh, Mrs. Lamerly? To be candid with you, I had already suspected as much. A handsome woman, you know, has so many temptations to a little levity."

"To be sure she has," readily conceded the intimate friend of the married beauty, "and then Sybil was so *very* handsome, and so much admired, that it is not to be wondered at if she *did* get herself a little talked of. For my part, I believe it is impossible for any one who is even commonly attractive to escape."

"No doubt of it," replied Mortimer, with a saturnine smile; "pretty women are the natural prey of malevolence and slander. There are degrees, however, even of scandal; and so long as nothing can be adduced against them beyond a little harmless coquetry, why, there is not much mischief done."

"True," replied his companion, as if lost for a moment in her own reflections; "but the line to be drawn between coquetry and—and—impropriety, is so extremely fine—

such a mere hair's-breadth—that, like the bridge of El Sirat, by which the Mahomedans are to pass into heaven, it is somewhat difficult to avoid treading over on one side or the other.”

“Aptly illustrated!” said Mortimer, as he swept back one of the long golden tresses of the lady, in order to possess himself of the chubby little hand of the sleeping child; a movement which brought him still closer to the side of the apparently unconscious widow. “Very ably illustrated! We should indeed be merciful to those who lose their footing, even if we cannot save them. But, to return to Sybil. You have known her many years?”

“We were girls together?”

“And you are acquainted with her cousin, Sir Horace Trevor, perhaps?”

“Oh, yes;” and Mrs. Lamerly laughed an equivocal laugh, which rang even to the depths of Mortimer’s spirit.

“He loved her, I believe?”

“To be sure he did, or he would not have sought to marry her.”

“I almost wonder that so handsome and fashionable a man should not have prevailed.”

“For shame, Mr. Mortimer,” said the widow, with a pretty display of childish indignation, as she struck his hand lightly with her slight and ungloved fingers; “for shame, you are trying to make me tell tales out of school.”

“Why should I?” asked Frederic, looking into her face with one of those smiles by which men generally retort the condescending familiarities of the other sex; “I have the whole romance by heart. Fierce love on the part of the gentleman; negative encouragement on that of the lady; a proposal on the one hand, and a refusal on the other. You see I have nothing to learn.”

“Indeed!” was the ambiguous rejoinder; “and so you consider that to be a romance worthy of an acknowledged beauty? Why, my dear sir, I could weave a better for the gawky daughter of a village curate.”

“Never mind the curate’s daughter; but indulge me with one according to your own view of things. Something pretty, piquant, and peculiar. I adore love-stories.”

It was a strange, almost a frightful look, which Mrs.

Lamerly turned upon her companion. There was a mocking triumph in her eye which darkened its pupil until it became almost purple; and an expression of eagerness in the dilated nostril and quivering lip that added to its fierceness; but it passed away as rapidly as it had risen; and, bending over the child, she said simply—

“I have no imagination.”

“I do not ask you to imagine anything; you know the world so well, and must have such a store of memories.”

“Do you suspect that I could be guilty of treachery?”

“I suspect nothing; but, as my meeting with you this morning has marred my sport for the day, I feel that you owe me some compensation.”

“You seem to forget that you have given me great cause to complain of you.”

“I?”

“Yes; undoubtedly. As Sybil’s most familiar friend, I had a right to expect at your hands far greater courtesy than you have shown me.”

“My dear Mrs. Lamerly,” said Frederic, as he took her hand and retained it, despite a slight, a very slight struggle for its release; “I am not a fashionable man, and always approach my wife’s friends with caution.”

“How incorrigible you are!” was the smiling reply. “You always will misunderstand me. To hear you, one would imagine that I wanted you to make love to me.”

“That would be very easy, and very pleasant,” remarked Mortimer.

“Upon my word you are too bad, and I will not allow it,” said the widow, releasing her hand from that of her companion; “so, in order to punish you, I shall leave you to yourself;” and, gently placing the little girl upon her lap, she began to collect her scattered hair, as if to enable her to put her threat into execution.

“Be careful, Mrs. Lamerly,” exclaimed Mortimer, springing from the ground; “you will awaken Eva. Allow me to act as your *soubrette*. I have a strong arm and a light hand: you shall see how well I can acquit myself.”

“How very incorrect, Mr. Mortimer!”

“What can you mean? Can anything be more simple? Does not the child prevent you from rendering yourself this service? and is not that child mine? What glorious

hair!" he continued, as he gathered it up, and endeavoured to bind it round her small and well-shaped head; "it is really the shower of Danae realised."

"What nonsense!" pouted the widow.

"It is a sin to torture it in such a way," pursued Frederic; "were you my wife, I should compel you to defy conventionalities, and to wear it *à la Madelaine*."

A slight suffusion rose to the brow of the lady.

"There, that will do, Mr. Mortimer," she said peevishly; "now give me my bonnet, and let me return to the house."

"There is the bonnet," replied Frederic, once more throwing himself down beside her; "but I cannot suffer you to leave me without the promised love-tale."

"I made no promise," said the lady, still only half appeased.

"Be generous, then, and act as though you had done so. Look around; can any spot be more appropriate for such a purpose? Come, now, I will prompt you—"Once upon a time"—

"Be it so," murmured Mrs. Lamerly, as a transient shadow passed across her brow; "'Once upon a time, then—since that is the fashion in which I am to commence—when I was quite a girl—But no, I am in no mood for story-telling this morning; and, moreover, what do you wish to know?'"

"All that you will confide to me."

"Well, then, I will be generous. Trust not Sybil too far——"

"Ha!——"

"You are, however, perfectly safe at present. She despises the fops and *roués* by whom she is now surrounded."

"And if her cousin were to arrive?"

"What cousin?"

"Trevor."

"Oh, yes; I had forgotten that Trevor was her cousin," said the simple beauty, playing with a tuft of wild anemones which grew beside her; "I have such a bad memory. Why, if Sir Horace were indeed to pay you a visit, there would be nothing surprising, you know, in such an arrangement between relations—it might be as well to

remember that the iron which has already been ignited heats the most easily. But no, no; he will not come here. And, besides, even if he should, why should he come only to renew his suit to Sybil? Lady Clara knows him, though, to be sure, he detests her—*that*, I will do him the justice to say: and I know him—just as I know Lord John, and a score of other men about town—but I have not the vanity to believe that I can be attractive enough to tear him from the dear delights of gayer scenes.”

“But, should he come, you advise me to be cautious. You consequently think that, despite his rejection, Sybil loved him?”

“No doubt she did, or things could not have gone so far. And, perhaps if that odious Palermitan Prince had not come in the way, she would have married him when once they were engaged; but she was ambitious, and the title dazzled her vanity.”

“You allude to Prince Saviatti?”

“Of course I do; and after he bowed himself off, it was natural enough that Trevor——But, upon my word, we are talking scandal!”

“As you say, it was natural enough that Trevor, after having ‘loved,’ should ‘ride away’ in his turn,” said Mortimer with the apparent calm of concentrated feeling, affecting not to have remarked the tardy caution of her last exclamation; “these are every-day events, and your romance is no more interesting than my own.”

“Ah! but——However, I will say no more upon the subject,” remarked the lady, affecting to check herself. “It is, I think, impossible that Trevor will intrude under your roof, and consequently the past is of little importance.”

“Trevor is here,” said Mortimer in a hoarse whisper.

“Here! Oh, no; he knows better.”

“I tell you he is here; I saw his carriage approaching as I left the house.”

But upon what pretext can he have come? Depend upon it, you are wrong.”

“And if not?”

“If not—why then—Oh, I see it all now,” said the beauty with a forced laugh; “his visit will be attributed to me, for we saw a great deal of each other abroad. And perhaps,” she added, fixing her large eyes steadily upon

her listener, "perhaps I have been too modest, and it may be so; in which case Sybil has indeed shown her friendship."

"She should be grateful to you for such an admission; and do you also love this man?"

"Really, Mr. Mortimer——"

"We are speaking confidentially, you know, and you may answer such a question without repugnance, particularly when I assure you that, should it be otherwise, he shall not remain four-and-twenty hours in my house."

"Why, you are a perfect tyrant!"

"That is no reply; and I must have one."

"Surely I am not bound to betray myself?"

"Under the present circumstances I think differently. You have now told me either too little or too much, for me not to desire a perfect understanding upon the subject. Should you indeed be the object of Sir Horace Trevor's pursuit, are you prepared to receive him as a suitor?"

"Upon my honour, Mr. Mortimer, I do not comprehend your right to ask me such a question."

"Perhaps not, and yet it must be answered."

"Well, then, it is possible that I might be induced to listen to him."

"So be it," said Mortimer rising; "as your acknowledged suitor alone can he remain an inmate at Westrum. The romance shall at least never reach its climax."

"Your readiness to dispose of me is, at any rate, not very flattering," pouted the unsophisticated beauty.

"My dear Mrs. Lamerly, I owe you so much gratitude for your kindness to my little Eva, that I am unfeignedly interested in furthering your happiness."

"But suppose I do not love this man?"

"You will be fortunate. It is those who marry where they love only to find their affections cast back upon them, who run the risk of being made miserable."

"Naughty man! What would Sybil say to such a speech from you?"

"If she could make up her mind to be sincere upon the subject, she would tell you that I am quite right. Believe me, Mrs. Lamerly, it is always safer to marry where you are loved, than where you love. The one is an illusion, and the other a reality."

"I am sure that my poor Augustus loved me dearly."

"And can you honestly quote that circumstance as a proof against my argument?"

"Of course I can."

"I am glad ; very glad to hear it."

"I cannot think why you should doubt anything so simple. Of course I never could forget that he ran away with me in defiance of all his disagreeable relations. Every woman is proud of such a proof of her power."

"No doubt of it ; but gratified vanity is not affection."

"I detest such subtle reasoning, and I do believe that you are laughing at me."

"I dare not. You are too handsome."

"Upon my word, Mr. Mortimer——"

"And upon my word, Mrs. Lamerly, I am perfectly serious. Again I repeat that you are too handsome to be trifled with without risk. Suppose now, for instance, that Sybil should surprise us at this present moment——"

"I care not though she should."

"Yet she might think, and, perhaps, say——"

"She *dare* not!" exclaimed the usually supine widow, with flashing eyes ; "she dare not!"

"Am I to understand that she would dread a retort?"

"Perhaps so."

"Mrs. Lamerly, I beseech of you to tell me seriously——"

"No, I will not say another word. And now, since you have taken fright, leave me ; and, if you will do me the favour, be good enough to desire Mrs. Harris to come and take charge of Eva, for I doubt whether I have strength to carry her all the way to the house."

Mortimer paused for a moment, and glanced down upon the beautiful young creature before him, upon whose brow a shade of offended dignity was discernible. Half fascinated and half terrified by the strange mixture of coquettish simplicity and undaunted worldliness which was betrayed in her every word and action, he could not at that instant forbear assimilating her to the glittering, but envenomed serpent which, while it enthrals the eye, poisons the life-blood. Nevertheless, he could not altogether liberate himself from the spell. It was the first

time that he had looked upon her without positive dislike, and yet, instead of resenting a coldness which would have irritated many women less attractive, she had scarcely disguised a far more flattering feeling towards himself.

The result of a momentary silence was a proposal himself to take charge of the sleeping child, and to accompany Mrs. Lamerly to the house.

"But suppose Sybil should see you," said the widow, with an arch and mocking laugh.

"In my turn I reply that I care not."

"Well, then, suppose that Trevor should see *me*?"

"You can alone decide if that circumstance is likely to affect you," retorted Mortimer, with offended vanity.

"Such a family group!" again smiled the lady.

"I wish it were!" retorted the gentleman; and in another moment Eva reposed quietly upon the arm which he extended to receive her, and the bright-eyed widow hung confidently upon the other.

"And now, will you promise not to be jealous of Trevor?" she asked, in a low whisper, as she approached her coral lips to his ear.

"We shall see," replied her companion, in the same subdued tone, pressing the little hand which rested against his side still more closely.

"And not to suspect Sybil?"

Mortimer laughed, but it was not the buoyant laughter of earlier days and of earlier hopes.

CHAPTER XLIII.

Nothing could exceed the excitement produced by the arrival of Sir Horace Trevor upon the circle assembled at Westrum. Self-centred, worldly, and satirical, he possessed every quality calculated to shine in society; and as the said society cares only to be dazzled, tinsel passes current as readily as sterling ore.

Trevor had few vices, and it is probable that, had he been educated in a different school, he would have adopted

some more worthy ambition than that of merely figuring as "a man about town;" but the evil, which in his case owed its origin to his pecuniary independence, and consequently freedom from the enforced thralldom of professional study, was gradually increased by his own experience of men and manners—ay, and of women too; for even that fact must be admitted in his justification.

As he had begun life by investing everything about him with a fictitious brightness which would not bear the test of trial, so he revenged himself upon his own delusion in after years by deepening and darkening every shadow that fell across his path. Systematically sceptical, he doubted even where his reason should have been convinced. A Sybarite on principle, he was irritable under everything which interfered with his individual gratification; and when he occasionally encountered persons of more liberal ideas, he either sneered at them as dupes or denounced them as hypocrites.

But again we repeat that Trevor was only such as the world had made him—that world of fashion, frivolity, and falsehood which was his peculiar atmosphere. He was a moral wreck, which, nevertheless, retained some portion of its original brightness.

Such was the man whose advent beneath the roof of Mortimer occasioned such universal gratulation. He had, as we have seen, arrived early in the day, and Sybil learnt, with a sensation of relief, that he had taken possession of his apartment before her other guests were assembled at the breakfast-table. Confident as she felt in her power over her husband, she was for the first time conscious of an anxiety which she had never hitherto experienced. She was quite aware that Mortimer both despised and disliked the circle which she had already drawn about her, and she knew full well that Trevor would be even less acceptable to him. It might be also that a vague presentiment of danger warned her of the probable consequences of her weak compliance with the suggestion of her *soi-disant* friend Mrs. Lamerly, and that something like a doubt crossed her mind as to the perfect good faith in which it had been made. Her woman vanity whispered that, having once loved *her*, it was impossible Trevor could be thrall'd by the baby-

graces of the fantastic little Amabel : and, if it were not so, why, after the insult which he had offered to her at The Grange, should he be once more forced into her path ? Gladly would she have forgotten his existence, for his name it was which was inscribed in the darkest page of her life's volume ; but she felt, whatever might have been the evasions of the crafty widow, that she was in possession of the fatal secret which she was anxious to conceal from Mortimer, and she was consequently so thoroughly in her power that she could not protect herself from the impending evil.

Sybil was, however, no weak and trembling woman to be scared by shadows ; and, thus driven to rely upon her own strength, instead of yielding to impotent alarm, she endeavoured to fortify herself by arguments tending to reassure her mind. Trevor had already tested the power of her former affection by endeavouring to renew it—and he had failed. She was now married, and he must be convinced of the futility of further pursuit. He had, moreover, offered to her an insult which he must be well aware that no woman of pride or principle could ever pardon. But at this phase of her reasoning Sybil paused ; and although no one was near to detect her unbidden emotion, she covered her face with her spread hands to conceal the crimson blush which mounted to her brow. Alas ! what faith could Trevor place in either her pride or her principle ? Had she not deceived him cruelly ? And was it not from his weakness that she had wrung the resources which had enabled her to make a second dupe ?

This reflection for a time prostrated her courage, but, happily, she had been prepared for the struggle which awaited her ; and during the time that had elapsed between the departure of Mrs. Lamerly's invitation, and the arrival of its object, she had possessed ample time to decide her measures. She must not receive him coldly, as such a want of courtesy to a bidden guest could not but excite the suspicion of those about her, while it might, moreover, tend to impress Sir Horace himself with the idea that she feared him. Neither must she permit him to resume the easy and familiar tone, which would almost warrant the trial of a second impertinence, from which

her dignity as the wife of Mortimer might be insufficient to secure her. No; she must meet him with a smile and an extended hand, it is true, but the smile must be cold and the hand passive. She must regard him only as the presumed suitor of an early friend, and leave Mrs. Lamerly to do the honours of Westrum to her own visitor.

How she regretted that they still had a mutual secret, and that she could not, without compromising herself in the eyes of her husband, at once and definitely divest him of the privileges of their presumed relationship; but this she was painfully aware was now impossible. How she loathed the folly which had induced her to avoid confiding in the mad passion of Mortimer before their marriage, when a few tears and smiles would have induced him to overlook even the presumption of an admitted rival, and which had thus bound her hand and foot before the altar of deceit and falsehood.

How she lingered at her dressing-table, as if delay could profit her in such an emergency; but at length the last string was tied and the last frill adjusted. Her maid astonished, and at length irritated by her unusual tardiness, had begun to busy herself in repairing the disarray of the chamber; the warning bell had rung, and she felt the necessity of controlling her emotion. Not even then, however, could she compel herself to proceed at once to the breakfast-room; but, snatching up her gloves and handkerchief by a sudden impulse, she left the chamber, and proceeded hastily to the nursery.

There she found only Mrs. Harris and her assistant, by whom she was informed that Miss Eva had been for the last two hours in the grounds, under the guardianship of Mrs. Lamerly.

"And who authorised you to trust your young lady out of your sight for such a length of time?" inquired her mistress, the circumstance affording a safe escape-valve for the hitherto hidden bitterness of her feelings.

"Indeed, ma'am," hastened to reply the astonished nurse, "I thought you must have known that the kind good-natured lady takes Miss Eva out every morning when the weather is fine enough for her. If I had thought that you would object——"

"Of course I object," retorted Sybil, imperiously; "I will permit no interference of the sort. You should immediately have acquainted me with this caprice of Mrs. Lamerly's."

"As my master was aware of it, ma'am, I supposed——" commenced the female functionary, anxious to justify herself.

"Oh, indeed; your master was aware of this arrangement was he?" interposed Mrs. Mortimer, sarcastically. "And does he also undertake to amuse Miss Eva during her daily absence of two hours?"

"I am sure, ma'am, I cannot say," answered the nurse, becoming more and more alarmed at this exhibition of displeasure, succeeding, as it did, to so habitual an indifference to the movements of her charge.

"You appear to be strangely ignorant of your duties, Mrs. Harris," said Sybil, sternly; "and I must request that, in future, no one may be suffered to interfere with the arrangements which I see fit to make for my child."

"You may depend upon it, ma'am."

"I do," replied Mrs. Mortimer. "And now go at once in search of my little girl, and bring her here. I will await your return."

At this moment a clear ringing laugh became audible, and footsteps were heard ascending the side stairs which led to the nursery, while in the next instant the lisping voice of Mrs. Lamerly exclaimed, in accents of childish amusement—

"Ah! you may open your large grey eyes, Eva, and stare about you with astonishment! Yes, you fell asleep under a tall sycamore, and here you are, you can't tell how, at home again, and on the very confines of your own domain! Oh, fairy, you have guessed all about it now! and have you no kiss for papa, who made so pretty a cradle for you?"

The words had scarcely escaped her lips when the speaker crossed the threshold of the apartment, followed closely by Mortimer, about whose neck the child had clasped its little arms. Instantly, as if by a species of instinctive fascination, the eyes of the two friends were riveted upon each other; but, ere long, those of Mrs. Lamerly fell before the fixed and almost contemptuous

gaze of Sybil, who, after a momentary silence, broke into a forced and bitter laugh, as she said sarcastically—

“Truly, Amabel, you are becoming matutinal! Harris informs me that you have elected yourself head nurse to Eva, and that you are abroad with her for hours before I have finished my morning sleep. You are really too good. But I fear that to-day, at least, you have been the victim of your own kindness; for I perceive, what I had not before remarked, that the wind must be very high, as it appears to have inconvenienced you during your walk, and a portion of your hair is streaming from under your bonnet.”

“That is very probable,” replied Mrs. Lamerly, with imperturbable composure, “for Eva has been amusing herself by inventing for me a *coiffure à la sauvage*. I am sorry that you do not admire the effect.”

“She has seized an unfortunate opportunity for the exhibition of her talent,” resumed Mrs. Mortimer, in the same biting accent; “but, perhaps, you have been too pleasantly engaged to be aware that not only has the second breakfast-bell rung, but also that your friend has arrived.”

“My friend? What friend?” inquired the widow, with a pretty assumption of innocence.

“Sir Horace Trevor.”

Mrs. Lamerly shot one quick glance towards Mortimer, who had during this short dialogue been endeavouring to induce the child to leave his arms for those of the anxious Mrs. Harris—an attempt in which he had only just succeeded—and as he turned he met the meaning eyes that sought his own.

“Oh! *your* cousin!” exclaimed the lady with affected joyousness; “how very nice! He will initiate us, in his own dear satirical way, into the latest scandal of half the European capitals; and tell us all about Lady Clara’s old flame, General O’Keefe; and Mrs. Babintgon’s French marquis; and poor Saviatti; and half a million of our old acquaintances.”

“And is that all you expect from his visit?” asked Sybil, more and more provoked by the perfect *nonchalance* of her friend.

“Oh! no, believe me; by no means,” replied the widow,

with marked emphasis. "But you do not say a word, Mr. Mortimer," she continued, addressing Frederic, who had remained silently and steadfastly scrutinizing the words and manner of his wife; "are you not charmed to hear that our party has received such a delightful addition?"

"Sybil's relatives must always be welcome under my roof," was the somewhat cold reply; "although, I confess, that on the present occasion I am somewhat perplexed to imagine what can have procured for us the honour of a gentleman's society, who, on the last occasion of his presence at Westrum, declared it to be the *ultima thule*, and regarded its inhabitants as only one degree removed from Hottentots."

"Oh! that is so like Trevor!" said the widow, clapping her little hands, in order to silence the rejoinder which already quivered upon the lips of Sybil; "did you ever hear him praise anything? He is such a spoilt child. Do you know, he is a perfect sceptic; does not even believe in the love, nor indeed, I am afraid I may add, in the virtue of our sex. Is it not shameful? When everybody knows that women——"

"Pray, Amabel, do not inflict upon us what everybody knows," said Sybil with affected impatience; "but ring for your maid to dress your hair, or you will not be fit to present yourself at the breakfast-table."

Mortimer was not, however, to be so deceived. He understood the expression of Sybil's speaking features, and he saw at once that no mere dread of Mrs. Lamerly's disregard for appearances could so thoroughly have ruffled her. He was conscious that although the two persons before him had ventured upon a war of wit which they were unable to control, there was a mystery in the advent of Trevor which neither was anxious to reveal in his presence. Resolved, therefore, to terminate the scene at once, he pointed with a smile to the door, exclaiming—

"You are dismissed, you see, Mrs. Lamerly; and, in obedience to your liege lady, have only to withdraw; although, fortunately for all who know and admire you, to reappear ere long with increased attractions."

"So be it," was the laughing rejoinder. "Good bye, Eva," and she tenderly embraced the little girl, who was now contentedly playing upon the lap of her nurse; "your

frolics have entailed a terrible lecture upon me ; but I forgive you"—and playfully kissing her fingers to the laughing child, she bounded from the room.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SIR HORACE TREVOR did not make his appearance until the morning meal was nearly at an end, and he had no reason to repent the arrangement, for the party had just arrived at that satisfied and complacent point when all which follows is rather matter of idleness than appetite, and each member composing it is not only willing, but eager to repay, by the most assiduous attentions, the ample return of news and gossip.

Fortunately, their first meeting was one of less embarrassment than Sybil had anticipated, for there was such a general greeting on his entrance that no one, save her husband, remarked the slight flush which rose to her cheek, and the almost imperceptible quivering of the lip with which she received him as he made his way towards her, or the constrained "You are welcome, Sir Horace," which was her brief response to his eager address. This partial display of emotion was nevertheless by no means calculated to alarm him, for it was no more than every delicately-minded woman might be disposed to feel upon meeting, after an absence, the man who had once offered her his hand ; while in the manner of Trevor himself he could detect nothing more objectionable, as it gave him the impression of a graceful piece of acting rather than the impulse of deep or excited feeling.

Not one of the guests, however, came to the relief of her hostess so effectually as Mrs. Lamerly, who, with one of her childish exclamations of delight, extended her jewelled hand, and said, half-laughing and half-pouting, "So you have remembered your old friends at last, my dear Trevor—and only just in time, I can assure you—for both Sybil and I had made up our minds to give you up if you did not repent your ingratitude. However, you need not look so dismayed ; we will forgive you ; but, in return, you

must tell us everything about everybody everywhere, and make yourself as agreeable as you can."

She was not, however, so exclusively occupied with Trevor as to overlook the probable anxiety of her host, and more than once she raised her heavy eyelids, and turned upon him one of those rapid glances of inquiry which betray so little and imply so much. She wished him to understand that she was endeavouring to screen her friend from his suspicions, and sacrificing herself for his peace of mind.

Nothing could be more amiable! And it was beautiful to witness the perfect goodwill with which the generous and artless Mrs. Lamerly executed her self-appointed task. Scarcely would she permit Trevor to address his hostess, whose tardy answer was in almost every instance anticipated by that of her friend; and then she had so many questions to ask, and so many half-whispered communications to make, that Trevor found ample employment between his *pâté de Périgord* and her unceasing demands upon his attention.

"After all," observed Lady Clara, with one of the dull stares of her lack-lustre blue eyes for which she was peculiar.—"After all what?" the reader may be inclined to ask, nor can we satisfactorily reply; suffice it that this mode of expression—this *lucus a non lucendo*—was a favourite with the lady.—"After all, Sir Horace, I can scarcely imagine how you could make up your mind to leave Italy, where all is so nice, and so easy going, and so pleasant, for this nasty, dull, foggy, catch-cold country."

"Fie upon you, Lady Clara!" exclaimed Mrs. Lamerly; "do you suppose that our dear Trevor has no natural affections; and that even one glimpse of his cousin will not repay him for the sacrifice?"

"His cousin!" said Lady Clara, doubtfully; "why, I never knew that you were his cousin!"

"Nor am I. I allude to Mrs. Mortimer."

"Dear me!" ejaculated the peer's daughter, more and more mystified; "I cannot understand it. Let me see. Old Sir Reginald, his grandfather, had three sons; one was killed in the Body Guards before he was twenty; another married Lady Barbara Dobson, the Nabob's widow, and

having no family, left all her fortune to *his* father. And you, Sir Horace, are an only son."

"You are quite correct, *amica bella*," replied Trevor, biting his lips to suppress a laugh, while his ally, Mrs. Lamerly, was exhausting all her ingenuity in endeavouring to balance a tea-spoon upon the edge of her chocolate-cup; "right as a clerk in the herald's college—only—you have forgotten my aunts."

"I never before heard that you had any."

"*Comment!*" cried Trevor in affected astonishment; "did you never hear the unfortunate history of the beautiful Mrs. Hildebrand, who eloped with her coachman?"

"And was this sporting lady the ancestress of our fair Sybil?" lisped out the widow innocently.

"Now, all the fates forfend!" said Sir Horace. "No, no; I had another aunt; and were Mrs. Delamere in the room she could answer all your questions; but it is fortunate, as we have fallen upon this topic, that she is not present; for since Honoria's lapse she is always extremely distressed by any allusion to the past."

Mortimer started. Here then was, at last, one tangle of the ravelled skein drawn out; and once more Sybil stood acquitted. A smile, which was almost one of relief and gratitude, flitted across his lip; but meanwhile the sensations of Sybil herself were infinitely less satisfactory. The audacious and unblushing effrontery with which Trevor had thus invented for himself a supposed family connection which had never in reality existed—the easy complacency with which he had calumniated the character of her sex, in order to make his tale run more glibly—and the self-satisfied look with which he turned towards her at its completion, in order, as it seemed, to claim her gratitude for his exploit—rendered her more and more conscious of the depth of the abyss into which she had been plunged by her own levity.

Henceforward it was indeed vain to hope that the lie could ever be retracted, and she must abide its consequences, be they what they might; while, as if to augment her mental torture, Lady Clara continued to pour forth her surprise in the "Dear me!" and "Well, I never!" of mindless astonishment.

"You must tell us all about your aunt Hildebrand,"

interposed Mrs. Lamerly, during a momentary pause. "It must be such a funny affair! I can understand a woman falling in love with a prince, or a—"

"Or a margrave," whispered Trevor in her ear.

"For shame! you are really unbearable," pouted the lady; "but do tell us the story. Or, perhaps," she continued, interrupting herself abruptly, "now that we know all about it, Sybil will give us the details."

"You are too obliging, Mrs. Lamerly," was the indignant response of her hostess; and, moreover, I pledge you my honour that I am as ignorant of them as you are."

"I am convinced of it," said Sir Horace, with well-assumed gravity. "From whom were you likely to hear such a relation? Certainly, not from your mother."

Between the baronet and the widow there existed no secrets. He was aware of the whole of her past career; had worshipped at her unrighteous shrine when she swayed the fortunes of the pigmy court of —; had been indebted to her for a host of those trifling services so invaluable to the travelling Sybarite; and had, in return, vowed to her one of those everlasting friendships which are so convenient to the worldly and unscrupulous, and wherein the give-and-take system forms so efficient a bond of union.

It has already been explained that Mortimer had remorselessly wounded the vanity of Mrs. Lamerly, and embittered her feelings; and that what at first had originated in mere levity and idleness, had become in her eyes an imperative duty to herself; and, as she mentally argued, a just and consistent vengeance upon the insolent security of Sybil. How dared Sybil affect at times to question, and almost to sneer, whenever she alluded to the period of her widowhood? Was Sybil, then, so faultless, that her past life had woven a circle of light around her which was impassible?

As she asked herself the question, the thought of Trevor recurred to her—but Trevor was at Venice. What then? Could she not summon him to her side? And she did so; we have seen with what result.

"Do you know that you are a species of miniature divinity?" said Sir Horace to his fair and frail ally about a week after his arrival at Westrum, as he found himself alone with her in the morning-room, and seated on a low stool at her feet,

was amusing himself by tuning and untuning her guitar. "You are, indeed! But come now, be frank and honest. You do not expect me to believe that you had no ulterior view in thus bringing me into contact with my improvised cousin; and that it was solely and entirely *pour l'amour de mes beaux yeux* that you called me from Venice?"

"What other motive could I have?"

"Nay! that is precisely what I seek to learn. That you have one is beyond a doubt; and that it is personal, is equally certain to one who knows you so well as I do. Surely, *cara*, you do not love this Mortimer? Why, child, you had better bestow your affections upon a willow-bough; satisfied, while the wind blows it hither and thither, that it must return to its natural position when the breeze falls, than upon such a human *girouette* as Sybil's husband."

"What an absurd idea!"

"What is it, then? For that I am no desired, or even desirable guest, to either the lady or the gentleman, is perceptible enough: and, therefore, you had some reason for urging my presence; and that reason I must know, or I bid adieu forthwith to this cave of Trophonius, with its two solitary gleams of sunshine. I love to commence, as Horace—wasn't it Horace?—says, *ab ovo*; therefore, I must be initiated into all the mystery of the springs before I consent to set the machinery in motion."

"Why will you not be guided by me?"

"Because I do not love to walk through the world with a bandage before my eyes; and, moreover, because I want to comprehend the probable extent of the obligation which you will owe me."

"Well, then, I am displeased with Sybil; *et pour cause*."

"Ha! I begin to understand. You have something to revenge?"

"A great deal."

"But, when you have so much in your own power, why should you have recourse to my assistance? Make the man love you, and you will have ample means of vengeance."

"And what would that avail me?" asked the lady with some asperity. "Save to afford her a new triumph over what she is pleased to consider as my levity? No, no; I

will adopt no such imperfect policy. So long as she continues under his roof, and is recognised as his wife, the contest is unequal."

Trevor smiled and struck a few discordant chords on the instrument which he was torturing.

"Now, pray do not make that horrid noise," said Mrs. Lamerly; "but tell me at once if you no longer care for Sybil."

"No longer care for her!" echoed Sir Horace, with sudden animation. "Impossible! Why, she is handsomer than ever."

"And sick to death of her humdrum husband and her old-fashioned country-house," pursued the lady in the same tone. "Had you a spark of spirit you would need no prompting from me."

A second, and a more intelligible smile, gleamed over the features of the Baronet.

"I see it all now," he said, with a light laugh. "Sybil once gone—And you really think such a thing *might* occur?" He was answered by a significant gesture. "And suppose it were so?"

"Oh, I have not a word to say against it. Nothing could be better imagined; and, as a matter of course, it would be an immense relief to my conscience. But—but—I must venture one more question;" and Trevor really looked embarrassed for a moment: "As I should be deeply grieved to compromise your pretty self, without some prospect of fulfilling your projects, I tell you frankly that I believe you have little chance of becoming the *wife* of this worthy squire."

"And why not?" asked the lady, indignantly. "Did he not marry Sybil?"

"He did: and it is precisely for that reason that I conjecture he will just have wit enough to be very cautious how he commits himself a second time. Now, don't look so defyingly. You know all that I mean; and you are quite aware how high an opinion I have of your abilities, as well as how sincerely I admire your person; but nevertheless ——"

"Do you mean to insult me?"

"Not a whit; but if we are to be honest confederates,

we must thoroughly understand each other. I thought you had more strength of mind."

"Pray leave me to conduct my own affairs," said the widow, sullenly; "I flatter myself that I am quite competent to such a task."

"I never doubted it for an instant; but still I felt it my duty to warn you."

"Wait till I am in danger."

"With all my heart. It is understood, then, that we are to be faithful allies?"

"Have we not a common interest?"

"True. My question was an idle one; and I deserve the rebuke. Our mutual undertaking is, however, by no means easy. Sybil evidently shuns me."

"She fears herself more than you."

"That, at least, is encouraging; and I will trust to your penetration; *car vous avez passé parla*. Now, do not be angry again: frowns never become you; and you know, by experience, that they are wasted upon me. But, tell me; for whom are you labouring so diligently?"

"For Sybil," said Mrs. Lamerly, with a sneer.

"What a graceful attention!"

"Is it not? Let it serve you as an example."

And then, having accomplished this mutual understanding, they talked of other matters perfectly irrelevant to the subject which still, however, remained uppermost in their thoughts; and, worthy colleagues in evil, did so with smiling brows and friendly tones. They had so much to ask and to tell; so many dear friends to be canvassed and condemned; and so many schemes of pleasure to arrange, that they both continued apparently unconscious of the *espionage* to which they were unceremoniously subjected.

CHAPTER XLV.

WHEN Gertrude awoke on the following morning she was several minutes before she could collect her thoughts; and, as she cast her eyes round the desolate apartment which

had been allotted to her, her first impulse was to close them again, in order to shut out all surrounding objects; but, in the next instant, she felt the utter folly and weakness of thus shrinking back upon the very threshold of her task; and, springing lightly from her comfortless bed, she hastened to dress herself, and to be prepared for the first summons she might receive.

The dark and soot-laden fog still hung heavily over the street, clung to the dingy window-panes, and made its way through the ill-fitted frames even into the chamber. No one requires to be told all the wretchedness of such a waking; while to Gertrude, totally unaccustomed as she was to a London atmosphere in any season, it seemed as though her very breathing were impeded. Steadily, however, she persevered in her purpose; and at length, closely folded in a thick shawl, but still trembling with cold, she made her way down stairs, with her writing-case in her hand, to the little parlour in which she had first been received. The shutters had been thrown back; and as no preparations had yet been made for the morning meal she found herself at liberty to sit down at once and commence the somewhat difficult task of explaining to Ernest her sudden evasion from Bletchley.

She told him of the hasty and imperative call which had been made upon both her duty and her affection for her mother's memory; of the state in which she had found her unfortunate relative; nor did she shrink from avowing that he had sunk from affluence to poverty. And then she besought him to bear with her if she entreated that he would not attempt to see her until her return to Bletchley; and not only forgive such a request in his own person, but even justify her in the eyes of his family, should they appear to resent the step that she had taken.

"He was my mother's only brother," she concluded, "a stern and prosperous man, who was regardless alike of family ties and family affections during the greater portion of his life. He existed, consequently, unloving and unloved, absorbed in large financial speculations, and engrossed by gold. Think, Ernest, what must now be the bitterness of his regret, and the desolateness of his position. His hard-earned gains have melted away within his grasp; the penury at which he used to scoff is abiding under his own

roof; and he has found no other source of comfort than a desire to possess for the (I fear) very brief remains of a wasted life the society of his hitherto unknown niece. Can you not, therefore, easily pardon both him and myself? And will you not readily do so? *We* have so many long years of happiness before us, while *his* days are already numbered, his hopes annihilated, and his grey hairs bowed down by misery, both actual and mental. I do not fear your reply to such an appeal, for I know your heart, and I have confidence in your consistency. Bear with me, then, as I would cheerfully bear with yourself in such an extremity. It is already much that I may be with you in thought, and that I am enabled to shelter myself from the present in the future."

Her letter to Miss Warrington was more easily written. To her she had only ~~to~~ announce her safe arrival under Mr. Spencer's roof, and to express her wish that none of the family at the Manor-house should be made acquainted with her place of residence.

Her task was scarcely accomplished ere Gertrude heard a stealthy step approaching the apartment, and saw the staid attendant of her uncle enter laden with the meagre preparations for breakfast. The astonishment of the worthy woman was extreme, on perceiving that the young lady, whom she had been fearful of awakening after her fatigue, was already up and occupied, and she busied herself with quiet alacrity in rendering her as comfortable as circumstances would permit.

Nothing could, however, remove the aspect of cheerlessness by which the orphan was surrounded; the clinging fog looming heavily and luridly through the window and obscuring every object without; the dusty grate, the curtainless cornice, the time-stained walls within, all conspired to depress her; and it was almost with a sense of relief that she heard the dull sound of her uncle's cane upon his uncarpeted floor, as he knocked to announce that he required the presence of his housekeeper.

Mrs. Sharp hastily poured out a cup of coffee, diluted it as she had done on the previous evening, and then placing a small slice of thin dry toast in the saucer, hurriedly obeyed the summons; nor did she return till the frugal meal of Gertrude was accomplished, when she an-

nounced that her master would see Miss Mortimer in a few minutes.

"He is much changed since last night, ma'am," added the woman; "and although he never alluded to it, I could see that he was very anxious from the time he wrote to you, lest you should refuse to come to him; for I more than once heard him mutter to himself, 'If she does not, there is time yet! There is time yet!' And then he laughed. You have heard him laugh. As for me, I would much rather hear him cry at any time than laugh that frightful laugh; it always chills my blood. But I am wrong to talk of this to you, ma'am; I was only going to say, that I think when he saw you at last he felt a great deal, though he was too proud to let you see it; and the agitation has been too much for him. He had some trouble to swallow his coffee, and the bread he could not touch. Poor gentleman! I believe that his troubles are nearly over."

"Then, for pity's sake," exclaimed Gertrude, clasping her hands entreatingly, "send at once for his physician. Surely you can procure a messenger somewhere in the neighbourhood, and I will pay him whatever he requires, provided he lose no time. See to this at once, Mrs. Sharp, and I will attend to my poor uncle during your absence."

The housekeeper shook her head.

"I dare not, ma'am," she said timidly; "you do not know my master; but if you authorize me to venture upon it, I will send a boy for Mr. Jackson, who can come as if by accident on his way somewhere else; and then he can advise you as to what is best to be done."

"By all means," said Gertrude eagerly; "by all means—now—this instant. I could not incur so terrible a responsibility alone."

"Mrs. Sharp curtsied and left the room; and when the orphan heard her open the house-door, and close it gently behind her, it was with a feeling of terror which she could not overcome, that she remembered she was alone with the dying man: dying, and dying *thus*—without a thought or a care for the Great Beyond, towards which he was hastening—without an anxiety on the subject of that life which must endure for ever, and

wholly occupied by the cares and futilities of that which was so rapidly to close upon him! It was very frightful; and the poor girl bent down her head, and buried her face in her hands, as she listened breathlessly for the return of her messenger.

It was not, however, the welcome footstep of the zealous housekeeper which fell upon her ear as she sat there in her terror, but the renewed pounding of the heavy cane upon the boards in the room above: and, starting from her chair, she swept back the long curls from her forehead, and hastened to obey the summons.

Even prepared, as she was, to see a change in the countenance of the unhappy invalid, she, nevertheless, started with surprise and fear as her eye first fell upon him. The hectic spot upon his cheek had deepened into purple; his lips were livid, and his brow bloodless; while it was evident, by the rapid convulsions which passed over his features, and the wild, fierce light which glistened in his eyes, that nature was making a last and powerful effort, which would in all probability utterly exhaust his slight remains of strength.

"Ah! come—come," he said, almost in a whisper, as with faltering steps, which she in vain endeavoured to render steady, she approached his bed-side; "come, for I can set your mind at ease. I shall not need your annuity, child; what remains in the house will now last my time. Sit down, sit down, and let us talk."

"Shall I not rather read to you, sir?"

"How can you?" he asked peevishly; "I have already told you that the paper never comes until the evening."

"But in your present state," again asked the orphan timidly, "could I not find something more appropriate, more comforting, than the mere news of the day?"

"Ah! I understand," said the sick man, as a sardonic smile quivered for an instant over his faded lips; "you care nothing about the money-market—you do not condescend to addle your brains with the dull concern of consols, and foreign securities, and all the great interests of a commercial country. I am sorry for it, child—I am sorry for it—for such indifference to the most important considerations of a rational and enlightened kingdom will bring bitter repentance in time. No, no; I want no

reading. I want to think, and to speak; and I have little enough time left for either. No fear of being taken at your word, child; the annuity is safe enough!" And that strange, unnatural laughter, deprecated even by the accustomed Mrs. Sharp, again burst from the parched throat of the fevered invalid; but, on this occasion, not with impunity; for in the very paroxysm of this forced and bitter mirth, a gush of blood followed the sound, and streamed down over the sheet which covered the breast of the sufferer.

Gertrude uttered a faint shriek, as she flung her arm about his neck, and raised his head from the pillow. It was a fearful moment for the solitary and inexperienced girl, but the sick man soon partially rallied.

"Thank you, thank you," he murmured huskily; "and now give me a drop of water."

Gertrude laid him down softly, and held a tumbler to his lips.

"Began at 99," he whispered with closed eyes, after the silence of a moment, "and closed at 101½. Better times are coming; better times. I must keep my eyes about me. Gertrude, where are you?"

"I am here, sir."

"That was a great rise, Gertrude. A great deal may be made by such a rise as that. I used to be very fortunate—very; at least folks said so, though I never believed that luck had much to do with it. Gertrude, if you should ever be rich—you know you will have the annuity which you offered me to begin upon, and many there are in the world who have reared a goodly brood without such a nest-egg—if you should ever be rich, watch the funds, child—watch the funds; and remember your poor uncle."

"Pray do not excite yourself, sir," said the anxious girl. "You are, just now, quite unequal to such an exertion. You need rest."

"I shall have enough and to spare before many suns set," was the reply of the faint and exhausted voice. "Leave me in peace now. And, Gertrude——"

"I listen, sir."

"Gertrude, I say, do not forget the pocket-book, and if Jackson should ask for it, when he comes—for he

must come after I am gone, you know—don't give it to him, but make him show you his accounts. It is a large sum, a very large sum for a poor man to handle, and—and I want to be quite sure that it will be well laid out.'

"You shall be obeyed, sir."

"Good girl! good girl! Worth a score of your mother. *She* married for love, poor fool; and then wanted me to pay the debts of her spendthrift husband. *You* have been wiser. An Armstrong will do, child; an Armstrong will do. You must be prudent and saving for a few years, and things will come round. Take care of your gold, and—your—gold—will—take—care—of—you. I——"

There was a long pause, for the sick man was utterly exhausted, and Gertrude, drowned in tears of mingled fear and horror, could not even attempt a reply; when, suddenly rallying once more, the invalid panted, rather than uttered, "Why do you close the shutters? Nothing can be done in the darkness. Give me light. I must have light—broad, unblinking sunlight. I shall be robbed in this foul darkness. Robbed? Who shall dare?" and he clenched his dry and withered hand, and attempted to extend it in menace, but he strove in vain; his muscular power was spent, and the shrunken arm fell powerless at his side.

What wild, and conflicting, and bewildered visions must have passed over the brain of the dying man during the hour which succeeded—for truly throughout one long and, as she believed, interminable hour did the miserable girl watch beside that unholy deathbed, unsupported, alone, and quivering with anxiety for the return of her messenger, who, meanwhile, having duly fulfilled her mission, had not ventured to enter the sick chamber unbidden, and was in her turn awaiting in her cheerless solitude the advent of the poor humble clerk, who was to be their sole support and comforter throughout the coming trial.

Gertrude thought of the placid and prayerful deathbed of the protectress of her youth, and averted her look from the rapidly-working features, and endeavoured to close her ears against the mammon-worshipping words of the dying man who lay before her. Her heart sick-

ened as the conviction forced itself upon her reason, that beyond fulfilling the mere trifling and unimportant duties required by the sinking body, her care could here be of no avail, for the voices of the soul had become clogged by the base yellow fluid to which it had been abandoned, and it no longer found utterance for higher or nobler aspirations.

Suddenly the hoarse murmur ceased, and then came one of those deep and awful periods of utter stillness so solemn in a death-room. All was silent and chill; and the wordless prayer which was poured out by the stricken spirit of the watcher arose pure and untinged with one taint of earth—an offering for him who cared not to supplicate for himself. And it would seem that it brought a blessing, for once more the wandering mind was cleared of the mist by which it had been overshadowed; and when next the sick man spoke he had regained the entire possession of his temporarily suspended faculties.

“Gertrude,” he whispered faintly, “I have no time to lose. Listen to me. Take the key which you will find in my pocket-book, but give me back the book—give me back the book. I like to feel it under my pillow, for then I know that it is safe. Good girl—good girl! Now open that chest, and at the top—at the very top mind, you need not search lower—you will find a packet of papers. Bring it here.”

Gertrude silently obeyed, and placed in the eager, trembling hand the sealed envelope which lay ready on the surface of the chest.

“All right, all right,” murmured the failing voice of the sick man; “and now lock the box carefully again, and give me back the key. There, that will do.” And, for a time, he turned the well-secured packet over and over, gazing at it with a fondness incomprehensible to his companion. Now he clutched it closely between his open palms, as though he sought to make it grow into his flesh, that thus it might become inseparable from himself; then he patted it lightly with his fingers as a playful mother would have patted the rosy and peach-like cheek of her nurseling; and, finally, he pressed it to his heart with a sigh so deep that it made Gertrude start.

Soon, however, he became aware that he was no longer equal to the excitement which it produced ; and, drawing the orphan closer to him, until her head was bent over the pillow, he placed his wasted finger upon his lip in sign of caution, and whispered shrilly—

“You must have it—you must have it—so take it now. It will never be to you what it has been to me, but there is no help for that—there is no help for that. Little as I have to leave it shall be yours. Sell the furniture—it will pay your journey home. Jackson has the duplicate—send for him. But do not trust too much even to *him*, Gertrude. I know what temptation there is in gold, and we have no right to tempt others. Look to yourself, girl—look to yourself.”

The voice ceased—the unhappy man had fainted.

The scream which Gertrude was unable to suppress caught the anxious ear of the housekeeper, who, to the great relief of the agitated girl, entered the room, followed by the poor old clerk, whose stealthy step gave back no echo as he rapidly approached the bed, and laid his hand upon the breast of the unconscious invalid. His first impression evidently was that his former patron had suddenly expired, but he at once discovered his error ; and a few drops of etherized water, forced through the clenched teeth of the wretched man, ere long restored him to consciousness. The hard, keen light had, however, departed for ever from his eyes, which, during that death-like swoon, had become dully and glassy ; the breath, which came hot and halting from his livid lips, heaved his chest almost to suffocation ; and beads of damp stood upon his forehead, and dimmed the lustre of his grey hair.

Jackson shook his head, and a moisture stole to his eye. He, perhaps, was the only being upon earth who loved the dying man then lying panting and struggling before him ; but the human heart is strangely constituted, and there is as much of the affection of habit in the world as that of actual sentiment.

They had grown old together ; their hair had silvered, and their step become less elastic from year to year, and each had noted the change in the other, although unconscious of it in his own person.

Even now, as Jackson looked upon the dying man, worn out alike by worldly anxieties and the narrow penury to which he was himself condemned by his slender and insufficient means, the tear which started to his eye was impelled thither by no reflection upon his own advanced pilgrimage, but fell solely for the sufferer. Perhaps no thought of the dread debt which all must pay had ever yet connected itself with his visions of the future : he had no time for sickness, and less for death.

Mr. Spencer had withdrawn himself from the firm, and closed his ledgers and day-books for ever ; his hours were no longer purchased and absorbed by business, but *he* was still at his post ; his income must be earned ; the bread of his family must be won before it could be broken ; he came upon earth to work, and so he laboured on like the patient ox treading out the corn of others, and never caring to look beyond the narrow circle of his daily duties. The Sabbath brought him rest, it is true ; but even that was the merely negative repose of physical and moral idleness. As he lay back in his slipper and ill-cushioned horse-hair chair, with his eyes closed and his lips quivering, he was generally reviewing in thought all the commercial transactions in which he had been engaged throughout the previous week ; or when by chance the sunshine wiled him out, and he sauntered forth, with his meek and spirit-broken wife upon his arm, to bask in the warmer and purer air of Tower Hill or the Artillery Ground near Finsbury Square, he could command no other subject with which to beguile the way ; and thus the bewildered woman, whose faded shawl had seen its seventh summer, and whose solitary silk gown had long been cameleon-hued by time, was entertained hour after hour by the detail of the operations involving thousands and tens of thousands of pounds, and, perhaps, taught to repine that, of all the mighty mass of wealth which was yearly poured out under the eyes of her labour-bowed helpmate, so very, very minute a portion ever passed into his own possession.

His world was a narrow one, and he could ill afford to lose one of the objects about which it had closed in. He spoke to the dying man—once—twice—in a meek, low voice, which faltered with feeling, but no answer

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was returned. It was evident that the little strength which yet remained to him was expended in the firm clasp which he still retained of the important packet.

At length his lack-lustre eye wandered languidly round the apartment until it rested upon Gertrude, who sat weeping silently apart. For an instant an expression almost of fierceness convulsed the muscles of his face, but it passed away, and he motioned to her to approach. She obeyed, and then, with considerable difficulty, he placed the papers in her hand, and once more closed his eyes with a groan which no mere bodily anguish could have extorted from him.

Despite his affliction a gleam of satisfaction irradiated the hard features of the observant clerk. He even nodded his head significantly towards the agitated girl, as he murmured, almost inaudibly, "It is done at last—it is done at last—and now he will be easier."

Then he drew still nearer to the sick-bed, and bent over the sufferer as if to compel one last look of recognition, but he watched in vain. Mr. Spencer had resigned his most cherished hold on life, and was still battling with the necessity to which he was compelled to yield. He lay for a while still—quite still and motionless—while the labouring spasms from which he had been previously suffering were subdued, and he breathed lightly and almost imperceptibly. Nature was, however, only pausing for a brief space, in order to rally all her remaining energies for one last effort, and, as the anxious watchers stood around him, he suddenly sat upright in his bed, with extended arms and clutching fingers, as he shrieked out—

"Give me back my gold—my gold! I have toiled for it—fasted for it—and it is mine—ALL mine! Give it back, I say! Has it not cost me alike body and soul? Thieves! Thieves! Will no one help me? Miserable old man that I am, give me back my gold! I cannot die till I have counted it once more—only once more—and then——"

But again the crimson tide gushed from his lips, and he fell heavily back upon the pillow: there was a sharp struggle—a low sigh—and Mrs. Sharp drew Gertrude from the bedside.

"You had better leave the room, ma'am," she said, as she supported the tottering steps of the orphan to the door. "You can be of no further service here, for the poor gentleman is gone."

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE poison worked at Westrum. It was in vain that Mortimer sought some cause of quarrel with his unwelcome guest, for Trevor was too listless and too well bred to take offence where he persisted in declaring that such an intention was impossible; while, once more thrall'd by the beauty, and fascinated by the accomplishments of his brilliant hostess, he became cautious in his demeanour, and measured in his attentions. The master-spirit of Mrs. Lamerly was, moreover, at work; and the presence of Mortimer always sufficed to call forth all her playful and pretty coquetry, addressed, as those around her supposed, to the fashionable baronet; but which she tempered by such appealing glances towards Frederic, as encouraged him to believe that he had at least an equal share in their display.

Too indolent to indulge in the sports of the field, utterly unoccupied by business of any kind, and consequently at the disposal of the circle in which he chanced to move, Trevor found many opportunities of renewing his old friendship with Sybil, and of profiting by the advantages due to her indiscreet deception, while Mortimer was engaged in the superintendence of his estate, and attending agricultural and county dinners, and with the most intense selfishness did he watch every gradation of feeling which she exhibited towards him. Had he trusted himself to speak upon such a subject, he would calmly have declared that he was neither her mentor nor her guide, that he was in no way responsible for her actions, and that past experience had not tended to discourage him in his present pursuit. But Sir Horace had few friends, and no confidant, save indeed the diplomatist's widow, and even she had volunteered the office, and was endured rather than encouraged.

His secret was therefore safe ; and the self-deluding Sybil left free to shape out her own destiny.

Surrounded by persons who, from peculiar causes, were at once authorized and inclined to be indulgent, Mrs. Mortimer had no one near her, save her mother, who would have put forth a hand to lead her back into the path of prudence ; and even that mother appeared wilfully to close her eyes against the growing evil.

But it was not so. No change of place or society had any longer the slightest effect upon Mrs. Delamere. Always languid, listless, and hypochondriacal, her days succeeded each other in the most insipid monotony. Scarcely did she appear conscious of the change of season, or the progress of time.

Satisfied that Sybil *was* married, she never cared to remember that she might yet have many trials before her, dangerous to so vain and ambitious a nature as hers ; and as her counsel or opinion was never asked upon any subject, so neither did she seek to proffer it.

Nothing, in short, save actual bodily absence, could have created a more effectual separation between mother and daughter, than the system which they had severally adopted ; and if an appeal was, by some strange chance, made to Mrs. Delamere by a third party, the never-failing reply of, "Sybil knows best," was the inevitable result of so bootless an attempt to identify her with the events which were taking place about her.

Thus all conspired to aid the projects of the vain and worldly baronet ; too cautious to commit himself in the presence of Mortimer, by word or look, he had made good his footing at Westrum ; while Mortimer himself, too weak to declare and enforce his will, even where he felt it to be right and fitting, lest he should once again be made the scoff of the idle and the impertinent, and cited as a jealous husband, and moreover somewhat engrossed by the clever coquetries of Mrs. Lamerly, suffered the growing intimacy of the *soi-disant* cousins to progress as it might ; satisfied that, upon the first legitimate occasion, he should be able to terminate it by a word.

Such an experiment is at all times hazardous, but especially so with persons of the temperament of Mortimer—men who are contented to live on *au jour la journée* ; pro-

crastinating for the sake of momentary peace ; hedged in by morbid prejudices ; and never glancing beyond a certain and narrow range of vision. Men, moreover, who have been reared and fostered in the worship of self, and who must be injured in that precious self before they can force themselves into energy.

He was no longer at home in his own house ; he had no interest in common even with his wife ; and yet he hesitated to break the spell which was darkening about him. His only hope lay in the attainment of the office for which he was still soliciting ; but hitherto he had merely received professions which had brought forth no fruit. Still, the *ignis fatuus* lured him on. He was afraid to believe that he could ultimately fail ; and when he ventured to expostulate with Sybil upon the subject, she coolly dismissed it with the remark, that so long as they continued in the country nothing could be anticipated in the shape of definite success. People must be upon the spot to carry a point of so much importance ; and meanwhile he was, if not enlarging his circle of friends, at least binding them to his interests by hospitality and kindness.

Mortimer listened ; and even if he did not quite believe, he at least yielded, and Sybil's point was gained. Her days passed on amid admiration and amusement ; she forgot the past, and she would not look into the future ; and thus week after week went by, until the winter was drawing to a close, and her party rapidly dispersing. Mrs. Lamerly, however, still lingered ; and she found it so difficult to tear herself away from her little pet Eva, and her comfortable home at Westrum, that day succeeded day, and she still maintained her post.

At length, however, when even Trevor, despite the well-worn privilege of his cousinship, saw himself compelled to depart in his turn, as Sybil made no sign when her dear friend more than hinted that she was ready to sacrifice herself till the commencement of the London season, Mrs. Lamerly was reluctantly forced to follow his example ; and then, for the first time since their marriage, Frederic and Sybil found themselves alone beneath their own roof.

Much as Mortimer had desired such an opportunity of retrenchment, it was not, however, without something like regret that he saw the carriage of the widow drive off. She

had amused his idleness ; and better still, she loved his child.

For a few hours he felt melancholy ; and even the caresses of his little girl had partly lost their charm ; but as the evening drew in he became less sad, and more irritable. A feeling of indignation mingled with his self-reproach. He began to consider himself as more sinned against than sinning ; and as the victim of circumstances which he had neither possessed the power to foresee nor to prevent ; while at intervals something like anger against the supine indifference of Sybil to interests which were so vital to himself, mingled with his musings.

They had retired from the dining-room, where they had partaken of a *tête-à-tête* dinner almost in silence, a nervous attack having confined Mrs. Delamere to her chamber for the day. A single lamp burnt upon a console at the extremity of the apartment, while a small reading-table stood beside the chair of Sybil, who lay listlessly back among her cushions, with closed eyes, mechanically passing a paper knife along the already opened pages of a review. From time to time, however, she looked up with ill-concealed impatience at the gorgeous timepiece upon the mantel, as if to chide the tardiness of the jewelled hands, while Mortimer occupied the other side of the fire-place, and sat gazing upon the mimic pageantry of towers and rocks, and monsters, presented by the burning mass before him.

A cloud was upon his brow, his lips were rigidly compressed, and as he arrived at the last phase of his reflections he suddenly raised his head, and looked earnestly at his wife. Her eyes were once more closed, and this fact only increased his irritation.

"Perhaps, Sybil," he commenced abruptly, "I shall find no better opportunity than the present for endeavouring to impress upon you the necessity of an immediate change in our mode of living. So far, I have only been weak ; but, should I suffer it to be pursued much longer upon its present scale, I should become dishonest. The subject is an unpleasant one for both of us ; it must be so ; but it is my duty not to shrink from it. The unfortunate delusion into which I was betrayed by my ambition, has, I think, by this time disclosed its utter fallacy ; and, consequently, the immense outlay which was intended to

further its success must finish with it. My fortune, ample as it is, or rather was, will no longer suffice to maintain so large an establishment; and we must also remember that we have a daughter."

"You have chosen a strange moment in which to sermonize," was the calm reply; "nor is the tone of your communication calculated to reconcile me to its import. One would imagine that I was the person to blame for the outlay of which you complain."

"I had no intention to reproach you, Sybil; but, even as you have shared my pleasures, so did I believe that you would be willing to bear your portion of my anxieties," said Frederic. "It is but another disappointment to find that I have been deceived."

Mrs. Mortimer raised herself proudly to a more erect position, as, with a scornful gesture, she asked, petulantly, "And I—think you that I have not also had to contend against mortification and disappointment? Did I not frankly confess to you before our marriage that I could never bear to be confounded with the common herd who are satisfied to vegetate, and have not moral energy to live? Have I not subsequently urged you to escape from this social nullity? And how have you responded to my appeal? Discouraged on the very threshold of success, apathetic where you should be resolute, and looking to the means when you should care only for the end, you have negatived all my previsions, and I am condemned to see you fall back contentedly into the insignificance from which I have been labouring to withdraw you."

"Sybil!" exclaimed her husband, starting to his feet.

"We are both, it would appear, unhappy in the selection of our subject to-night," was the cold response of Mrs. Mortimer to this involuntary demonstration of indignant anger, "but we shall do well to understand each other. My good offices are still at your service, should you care to accept them, although I cannot submit to be lectured like a forward child."

Mortimer pressed his hand upon his burning forehead. He feared to trust himself with words.

After the pause of a moment Sybil again spoke, and it

was with less asperity. "Listen to me Frederic," she said. "Let us not forget the respect which we owe to ourselves by bandying reproaches. You know the ambition of my nature, nor have I to learn the supineness of yours. I cannot forego the hope that I shall still see you assume that station in the world to which you are entitled ; but I know enough of public men and of public life to feel convinced that, without some effort and some sacrifice on your own part, it is vain for you to anticipate success in any undertaking. You just now quoted your child as a reason for withdrawing from a contest in which the attempt itself does you honour, and I now quote her as an incentive to exertion. A brilliant position in life will advantage her more than all the hoarded gold which you could ever accumulate in obscurity."

"But what if I am ruined in the process?"

Sybil shrugged her shoulders. "You talk as though you had no resources."

"They are, at least, not inexhaustible."

"At all events," said the lady, as, with one of her most sunny smiles, she extended her hand to her husband, "they will suffice to renew the trial. The coming season will, beyond all doubt, decide the question of your success. The first and most difficult step is already taken. Your pretensions are known, and your eligibility for the post you solicit has been admitted. The rest is a mere question of time, and the judicious employment of private and powerful interest."

"Sybil," said Mortimer, as he clasped the proffered hand, and, thoroughly appeased, looked fondly in her face, "that smile has thrown me back upon the past. I shall not seek to resist it. Only encourage my endeavours by a renewal of the affection which I feared that I had lost, and I will again have faith in your prophecy."

Nor did the conversation end here ; for Sybil, far from wishing, as she declared, to owe the concession of her husband simply to his consideration for her opinion, was desirous to convince his reason, and she accordingly proceeded to do this by the very effective method of alarming him with the fear of ridicule. What would the world say should he return into obscurity after so brilliant a *debüt* ? Should he now retire from the contest,

moreover, all the expenditure of which he complained would have been in vain; and surely this fact also required some consideration. And she urged all this so gently, so placidly, with so persuasive a smile, and so convincing an accent, that Mortimer, already dreaming a renewal of the halcyon days of their early marriage, was only too ready to admit the feasibility of her arguments, and too eager to prove his assent to her propositions.

And so the town house was once more engaged, the equipages retained, the club subscriptions paid up, and the land steward silenced for another season.

CHAPTER XLVII.

GERTRUDE had scarcely reached her room when the solemn promise which she had made to her departed relative, that she would immediately after his decease take possession of the important pocket-book, recurred to her mind; and, terrible as she felt a return to the death-chamber to be at such a moment, she did not hesitate to redeem it. For an instant she paused, however, to collect herself, but only for an instant; and then, with a calm step, she recrossed the threshold of the silent apartment, and approached the bed. Beside it knelt the meek and faithful clerk, holding within his own the hand of the dead man; and as, upon hearing the light step of Gertrude, he raised his head, and looked up inquiringly, she saw that there were traces of tears upon his pale and withered cheeks.

Instinctively she laid her hand upon his shoulder and smiled a sad smile, which he appeared instantly to comprehend; for, rising from his knees, he hastily wiped away the tell-tale moisture, and faltered out, in a trembling whisper, "I know it, my dear young lady, I know it. I have no right to be squandering time upon my own grief when I should be thinking of you. But, madam," he continued, with a fresh and irrepressible burst of emotion, "he who lies there was my first friend, almost, I may say, my only friend. To him I

owe the bread by which I live. It is hard to part from one's only friend—very hard. The happy and the prosperous cannot understand this, for they have so many that they scarcely miss them as they fall away each in their turn. They do not know what it is to have but one and to lose him."

"Sincerely do I trust that he appreciated your attachment," murmured Gertrude, considerably affected.

"I cannot say, I cannot say, madam," was the melancholy reply, as he stood with clasped hands, contemplating the rigid features of his former patron; "none on earth can ever know what were his real feelings; he kept his own secrets just as he worked out his own fortune. He always stood alone in the world, and he was able to do it, for his will was strong, and he needed no help from others. I shall never know what he felt for me, neither shall I ever forget what he did for me. But for him I might have been a beggar."

"Your gratitude must have brought a blessing to his death-bed."

"I trust it may, young lady, I trust it may. Bless you, at all events, for uttering such a hope! And now, madam, what orders have you to give me?"

"First, Mr. Jackson, be good enough," whispered the orphan, while a slight tremour passed over, and she clung to the chair near which she chanced to be standing for support, "to give me from beneath the pillow of my poor uncle a pocket-book which you will find there."

She was silently obeyed.

"And now, if you please," she pursued, "we will go down stairs to the sitting-room, and I will explain to you the nature of the services for which I shall intrude upon your kindness."

The clerk bowed respectfully, cast another long look towards the bed of death, and then opened the door of the chamber for Gertrude to pass out; but she also paused to contemplate for a moment the countenance of the dead man. The eyes had already been reverently closed, and the luxuriant masses of silver hair drawn more closely about the pallid brow; the outline of the face was strikingly fine and intellectual; the forehead high and broad, the lips well set, and full of firm and almost

harsh expression, the nose perfectly chiselled, and the whole character of the head calm and noble ; but, as the glance of Gertrude travelled on along the sheet by which the body was covered, she shuddered to perceive that even the pang of death itself had failed to relax the firm clenching of the bony hands. There was something frightful in this resolute grasp which had fastened upon nothing, when life, and all life's possessions were passing from him ; and, with a deep sigh, she bent for a moment over the corpse while she breathed a silent prayer, and then slowly left the room, followed by her deputed counsellor.

On entering the little parlour she found that the shutters were already closed, but that, by the active and judicious zeal of Mrs. Sharp, a comfortable fire had been kindled in the grate, while a couple of candles, placed upon the table, gave the room an appearance of comparative comfort. Thankfully did Gertrude throw herself upon a seat, as she motioned to her meek and silent companion to follow her example, and then gave an unconstrained course to her tears, and wept for awhile in silence, until the awe and exhaustion produced by the scene through which she had just passed became gradually relieved. Nor did the old man attempt, either by word or gesture, to check this overflowing of her surcharged heart. His respect for the niece of his patron was too profound to enable him to offer the slightest interference with her feelings, and, perhaps, he was not unthankful for this temporary pause. It is, at all events, certain that he no sooner saw the orphan wipe away her tears, and endeavour to regain her self-possession, than he drew towards him the tattered writing-case, and requested her permission at once to inform his employers of the melancholy event which had just occurred, and to request their promised permission to absent himself from his desk until his presence should no longer be required beneath the roof of his late master.

Gertrude was grateful for the suggestion, and this necessary missive written, it was immediately despatched to its destination by a trusty messenger ; while a second, more brief, and requiring less precision, was at the same

time consigned to the post, to warn the wife of the writer that she must not anticipate his return until the morrow.

"And now, madam," he said, as the door closed upon Mrs. Sharp, and they were again alone, "you have only to inform me of your wishes, and I am ready to obey them. The poor gentleman has, without doubt, already made such communications to you as will enable us to carry out his instructions."

"He has indeed done so, Mr. Jackson," replied Gertrude, as, with a trembling hand, she produced the pocket-book and proceeded to unclasp it. "This case, as he tells me, contains the sum which he wished to expend upon——" she paused, unable to proceed.

"I understand, madam," said the old man, while, with an innate refinement which did him honour, he withdrew his eyes from her face, "and I have only to ask if I can be of any service on the melancholy occasion."

"I depend upon you wholly, my good sir," replied Gertrude, drawing the note from its hiding-place; "I am so utterly inexperienced in all matters of business, that I shall be unable to stir a step in this melancholy affair without your aid. Will you, then, take pity upon my helplessness, and dispose of the money as you may judge best? being careful, however, to expend it all for this one purpose, such having been the express commands of my uncle."

"You shall be obeyed, madam."

"But—that is not all," pursued Gertrude after a painful pause, during which her cheek and brow had become crimson: "Will you forgive me, Mr. Jackson, if I ask you to let me see the—the—in short, to acquaint me afterwards with the precise manner in which it was disbursed? Believe me, I earnestly entreat of you, when I declare that no doubt of your honour induces such a request; but I must do my duty to the end, painful though it may be."

"Once more be assured that I understand you, madam," said the humble-minded and broken-spirited clerk, without one symptom of indignation. "It is no less my duty than your own to obey *his* will. You shall duly receive my accounts, with which, I trust, you will be satisfied."

Gertrude instinctively extended her hand to her aged protector, for such at that moment she truly felt him to be;—but if her inferential distrust of his probity had failed to

move him to emotion, such was far from being the case with this exhibition of condescending courtesy.

Everything is comparative in this world; and thus the niece of the opulent head of the house of Spencer, Owen, and Co. was, in the eyes of the junior clerk of the firm, so august a personage, that, for a moment, he doubted the evidence of his senses: but when he not only saw that small white hand remain outstretched towards him, but also a sweet smile of confidence and encouragement pass over the fair face of the orphan, he rose respectfully from his chair, and having ventured to clasp it in his own, bowed over it reverently, and then burst into tears.

"It is nothing, madam, it is nothing," he at length sobbed out, as he remarked her look of dismay: "I am better now: but the thought that I was holding the hand of my master's niece in mine, and that she was smiling so kindly upon me, was more than I could bear. It is an honour, madam, that will go down with me to my grave; and I will prove that I am grateful for it. There will not be many such memories to cheer the death-bed of Thomas Jackson."

"I entreat you not to talk in so sad or erroneous a manner, said the orphan gently. "It is I, Mr. Jackson, who am the obliged person, and who shall have much to remember and to thank you for. And now, what is our first duty?"

"True, my dear young lady; in the joy of my own heart I had forgotten all else. But it has been so very, very seldom my fate to meet with kindness, that I was for a moment beside myself. Now, however, I will lose no more time, for there is much to be done."

"Are you going to leave me, my dear sir?" asked Gertrude, as with irrepressible alarm she saw him take possession of his hat.

"I must do so, madam, for a while."

"But you will return and share my melancholy dinner, will you not?"

Again the old man raised his eyes to hers in bewildered incredulity: but there was no mistaking the expression of the sweet face that was turned towards him; and stammering out an answer which was unintelligible to Gertrude, and in which she could only distinguish the words *honour*,

and *happiness*, and *gratitude*, he bowed more profoundly than ever, and then hurriedly left the room.

It was a relief to the painful feelings of the orphan to find herself compelled to withdraw her thoughts for a time from the dreary associations of the morning, in order to give the necessary instructions to Mrs. Sharp for the preparation of the meal to which she had invited her late nucle's humble dependant.

"I am sorry to give you this additional trouble, Mrs. Sharp," said the gentle girl, "but Mr. Jackson is so very kind, and my uncle respected him so much, that I could not bear that he should feel himself neglected. Above all, do not forget the wine: he will have much fatigue to encounter to-day, I fear; nor will you stand in less need of some additional support."

How Mrs. Sharp longed to throw her arms about the neck of the considerate young creature who had even remembered *her* at such a moment! but respect restrained her, and she could only falter out her thanks."

"All shall be done as you desire, ma'am," she added, after an instant's silence, "and should you require anything in my absence, the nurse is already in my master's chamber, and her daughter waiting any orders which you may please to give, in the next room. I ventured to engage her without your permission, as I feared that you would feel lonely when I was obliged to leave the house."

Gertrude very sincerely expressed her thanks for this consideration, and felt considerably relieved by the consciousness that, on the departure of the housekeeper, she should not be condemned to the sole companionship of the death-room. Moreover, her conversation with the worthy woman, in consequence as it necessarily was, had tended to restore her to composure; and, accordingly, she had no sooner withdrawn than Gertrude seated herself at her desk, to inform both Ernest and Miss Warrington of the near cessation of her duties in town, and her approaching return to Bletchley; and she wrote on, and the time passed away unheeded, until a gentle knock at the door announced the return of her guest.

This was succeeded by the appearance of the housekeeper with the preparations for dinner; and although, as she came and went, Gertrude and her new friend were several

times left together, Mr. Jackson carefully abstained from any allusion to the business upon which he had been engaged ; nor did the orphan venture to question him.

But even this dinner, strange as was such a meal in that abode of famine, could not endure for ever ; and when the cloth was drawn, the candles snuffed, and the fire renewed, Gertrude and her companion were once more alone.

For a time both were silent. They had so few subjects in common upon which they could converse, and even these, with one exception, were already exhausted ; yet still the old man shrank from renewing that one. He felt that all he had to tell was so sad and so harrowing, that every moment gained was a pang spared to the inexperienced and sensitive girl ; but ere long he began to feel the futility and even danger of any further delay.

The sullen tread of feet in the narrow passage, and the murmured sound of strange voices, announced the advent of the expected functionaries ; but it was not until the stairs had ceased to creak under their steps that the kind-hearted old man, who had averted his eyes from Gertrude, as he saw her suddenly conceal her face in her handkerchief, and struggle for composure, rose silently from his seat and followed them.

When the old man, who was now her sole support, again entered the room, which he did a few minutes subsequently, he was even paler than before ; and there was an expression of anxiety upon his care-worn face, which he could not conceal ; he, however, seated himself in silence, and made no attempt to break the stillness. Some time consequently elapsed in dark and dreary thought on both sides, until Gertrude, more and more convinced by the uneasy working of his features, that he desired, but had not courage, to make some necessary communication to her, resolutely addressed him.

“ You have something to say to me, Mr. Jackson, by which you fear that I shall be distressed ? ”

“ Not distressed, I trust, my dear young lady ; but you have already suffered so much that I cannot bear to add to your trial by telling you that you have still a painful duty to perform. Mr. Spencer perhaps informed you that he had left a will.”

“ It is in my possession,” replied Gertrude, quietly.

“Are you also aware that I hold the duplicate?”

“I am.”

“And this will, madam; do you desire, at once to ascertain its contents? If so, I must summons Mr. Collins, by whom it was drawn up, as I believe that it would not be legal, and certainly, in any case it would not be advisable, to open it in his absence.”

“We will, if you please, defer all such considerations until after my poor uncle’s funeral.

“We have, fortunately,” pursued the orphan, in the same calm and unexcited tone, “received from his own lips all the instructions necessary to enable us to fulfil his latest wishes as regards himself, and to those only I am anxious to confine my thoughts until they are scrupulously accomplished. The rest of our task will then be reduced to a mere painful ceremony.”

“But, my dear young lady,” urged the old man deferentially, “would it not be well so to arrange as to enable you to conclude all your painful duties on the same day?”

“I shall be most grateful to you if you can accomplish so desirable an object.”

“Leave it to me, leave it to me,” said her companion, flattered by the confidence which she reposed in him. “My present principal, Mr. Owen, will wish to be invited to the ceremony, for he has already mentioned the matter to me; while, as I before ventured to observe, we cannot dispense with the attendance of Mr. Collins.

“So be it then,” said the orphan; “I leave everything in your hands, satisfied that you will act with kindness and judgment.

The week which succeeded was a trying one to the lonely girl. The shrouded and coffin'd corpse, the closed windows, the measured tread, the suppressed voices, were all full of dark and gloomy associations; but slowly as it seemed to wear away, it at length terminated, and from her narrow window she saw the modest procession leave the house.

Wearily and heavily did the time pass by until the return of the funeral party; at which period the orphan was aware that, repugnant as it might be at such a moment to her feelings, she must prepare to meet and thank the friends of her uncle, who had thus testified their respect for his memory.

Beyond this consideration Gertrude never looked. She was aware that the will of her deceased relative was to be read, and she had been warned by the careful old man, who had superintended all the arrangements, that she could not reasonably absent herself.

"Would that my poor uncle had trusted to my good feeling," she murmured to herself, as she smoothed back the glossy braids of her hair, bathed her swollen eyes, and cast a last languid look at her mourning dress, which, since the death of Mrs. Mortimer, she had never laid aside. "He had so little to leave, and the two faithful, although humble friends, who have tended him to the last, have so richly earned that little, that he had only to express a wish, or to confide in my sense of justice, to have dispensed with this last needless ceremony. But such has been his pleasure, and I have only to obey."

Calmly, therefore, although affected by a nervous tremour which she could not control, as she remembered that she was about, after a period of utter seclusion, to meet persons to whom she was totally unknown, she awaited the message which was to summon her to the parlour; and when the gentle tap of Mrs. Sharp sounded at the door, she rose without a word, and followed her with the important document in her hand.

As she entered the little sitting-room, both the gentlemen gave a perceptible start; but in the next instant they bowed profoundly as they were presented to the pale and beautiful girl, who, in her close mourning dress, and with downcast eyes, stood timidly before them. A chair was already placed for her beside the table, and in a few moments she recovered her self-possession.

The common-place condolences exacted by the occasion were courteously uttered and as courteously received: and then, as if aware that their presence must be rather irksome than desirable to the desolate young creature by whose grace and beauty they had been so forcibly impressed, the two gentlemen exchanged a glance of intelligence, and Mr. Collins respectfully inquired whether Miss Mortimer was prepared for the reading of the will. Gertrude replied, by placing in his hand the sealed packet which had been delivered to her by her uncle; while the old clerk at the same time deposited upon the

table the duplicate which had been committed to his guardianship.

The seals were broken, and the man of law, already aware of the contents of the parchment, commenced reading in a calm and clear voice, all those technical preliminaries which betray no trace of what is to succeed ; but as he advanced in his task his accent became slightly animated.

Mr. Owen leant forward in his chair, with an expression of genuine satisfaction upon his mild and benignant countenance ; and the kind-hearted old Jackson, who, during the last few days had learnt to love the orphan as he had never before loved anything on earth, bent his aged head upon his breast, and rubbed his thin hands together as though his delight were almost irrepressible.

Suddenly, however, he started, and a vivid flush rose to his cheek. He could scarcely credit the evidence of his senses ! And yet it was so—his name had been really mentioned in the will of his first patron. There could be no mistake ; and the kind and congratulatory smile of his present employer assured the happy old man that he had heard aright.

Then a deep stillness fell upon that narrow room ; and, for a short space no one cared to disturb the silence. But ere long the genial feelings of the warm-hearted merchant could no longer be controlled, and extending his hand to Gertrude, he said affectionately, “My dear young lady, suffer me to be the first to congratulate you. My poor friend could not have disposed more judiciously of a noble fortune. Long may you live both to enjoy and to adorn it.”

“Very little short of £80,000, Miss Mortimer,” said the lawyer with a courteous bow, “exclusive of the case of jewels, which your deceased uncle has declared to be contained in a chest in his sleeping-room, and of whose remarkable value I am aware. Give me leave to wish you all happiness in their possession.”

The orphan could only look her thanks ; for, bewildered by an event which had been by her utterly unforeseen, she was greatly and even painfully agitated.

“And you also, Mr. Jackson,” said his considerate principal, who at once detected the inability of the orphan

to sustain a conversation, "I very sincerely congratulate you also, sir. The bequest of Mr. Spencer is honourable to you both. I was well aware that he valued you highly; and he has now proved it to yourself. A good servant, sir, will, under all circumstances, as you see, make a good master."

"A very pretty little legacy indeed," followed up the more matter-of-fact man of law. "I have seldom been better pleased, Mr. Jackson, than I was when I put that £100 opposite your name, for I had known you well for years. This young lady will pardon me, I am sure, for such a confession, as I had not at that period the honour of her acquaintance."

"You could not have rejoiced more than I do, sir, at such an instance of my uncle's justice," said Gertrude, for the first time breaking silence, as her warm heart sympathized in the evident happiness of the modest dependant; and once more her hand sought that of the old man, who had modestly risen to reply to the flattering expressions of Mr. Owen. "I also owe you much, very much; nor will my claims upon your kindness terminate even here, if I can prevail upon this gentleman to consent to your becoming my escort to my home. May I trust, sir," she asked timidly, as she turned towards the smiling merchant, "that you will indeed spare our old friend to me for a few days? I am alone, and so shaken by the trials of the last fortnight, that I fear I should scarcely have courage to encounter the journey under any other escort."

"I am sure, my dear young lady, I may safely pledge myself that Mr. Jackson is at your disposal for whatever period you may require his services," was the ready reply. "He certainly does not look an objection, and I, as certainly, cannot advance one. But may not I also be made useful? or Mrs. Owen, who would be proud and happy to receive you until you leave town?"

Gertrude burst into tears. Her spirits were exhausted, and she could scarcely express her acknowledgments. There was no possibility of mistaking the cause of her emotion, and, accordingly, both the gentlemen rose, talked together for a moment of their several engagements, and then, warmly shaking hands with the new-made heiress, left the room, attended by the happy old clerk.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

Nothing could exceed the exultation of Mrs. Mortimer upon finding herself once more in London, and in the midst of the dissipation which she loved. All, save her own gratification and amusement, was again forgotten.

A single week sufficed to settle the Mortimers in London, and to collect about them all their former circle. Sybil's opera box was such a convenience to her female friends, and Frederic's well-ordered dinners so potent an attraction to his male associates, that day succeeded day in one endless round of pleasure.

There was no leisure for thought, and even Mortimer himself was no sooner launched for the second time upon the sparkling tide of London life, than he, too, entered upon it with a zest almost equal to his brilliant and selfish wife.

Mortimer had fallen into the dangerous error of believing in the possibility of an after-retrenchment, which would enable a man who, instead of contenting himself with the income arising from a fine property, lives for a time upon the principal, to redeem his past imprudence.

Nothing could have been more unfortunate than the rapidly increasing estrangement of Mortimer from his home, and it is probable that one expostulation from Sybil would have awakened him to the fact; but this expostulation was never uttered, and it is doubtful whether she would even have remarked his constantly recurring absences, had it not been from the sense of relief which they afforded.

Despite all her pride, she was aware of a certain restraint in the presence of her husband. It was only with Trevor, and individuals of his stamp, that her brilliant sallies and piquant sarcasms were appreciated as she desired, and thus it was pleasant to see herself surrounded hour after hour in her splendid drawing-room by kindred and applauding spirits.

The relationship of Trevor—a farce which still continued to be enacted, to the secret amusement of many

of his friends, who were quite conscious of its fallacies, while it authorized a degree of intimacy which encouraged him in his dishonourable views, tended in no slight degree to lessen the feeling of respect which some among them might still have been induced to concede to herself; and as he rode with her in the park, sauntered with her amid the noble shades of Kensington-gardens, or quietly established himself for the evening in her opera-box, sundry significant smiles were exchanged by the initiated, which were as full of malice as of meaning.

Still, no word or look had ever escaped Trevor tending to put his victim upon her guard. He had but limed the twig, and he calmly waited to see her entangled through her own free agency.

As time wore on, and Trevor felt more secure of his influence, he ventured to try the force of sarcasm. Sybil had already essayed its effect over the mind of her husband, but she believed that she was herself beyond its power.

"How sure I was," said Sir Horace, on one occasion when they were *tête-à-tête*—an occurrence which had, moreover, long ceased to be singular—"that all the pretty pastorals with which you favoured me when I visited The Grange, were mere words; very sentimental and picturesque if you will, but still mere words. If I mistake not, you then told me that you were about to marry a country gentleman, and prattled charmingly of his tenants, his local duties, and the delights of a life of rural responsibility and rural leisure. You have been a wife about two years, and I find you once more in town, as devoted to its pleasures as of old, and as able to increase them in your own person."

"The interests of my husband——" commenced Sybil, biting her lip.

"*Femme modèle!*" interposed Trevor with a smile; "but hear me out. I knew well that your passion for the world was far from being extinguished; that you were playing a part—nay, don't frown—unconsciously, perhaps, but still playing a part. And what then? I am acquainted with so many charming persons who are doing the same.

"Do you imagine that I could see you—*you*, Sybil Delamere—whom I had known, courted, followed, and extolled by all that was brilliant in London society, coldly

and wilfully settle down into the Lady Bountiful of a country town, and become the victim of a social suttee for the sake of——”

“Spare my husband, if you please,” interposed Sybil, but it was almost with a smile.

“I will—‘Hector requires a demi-god to combat,’” said Sir Horace with quiet insolence. “But to return to yourself. Did you really believe that, with all your art, you could impose upon me?—that you could induce me to suppose that you preferred a shady lane to an opera-box, a back-parlour to a ball-room, or—be it said with all respect—a sighing Strephon to a man of the world? Fie upon you, my fair cousin! For once you undertook a task beyond your strength. I no more believed you than——”

“You believe in our relationship.”

“Oh, excuse me; I have the most perfect faith in all that brings me nearer to you.”

“Pray do not exert yourself to be absurd. A recollection of what it was which necessitated the deception should suffice to keep you silent upon the subject.”

“Oh, Mr. Mortimer’s somewhat precocious jealousy? But surely you are not unjust enough to make me responsible for his weaknesses?”

“Enough, enough!” said Sybil hastily. “Why do you not marry? That is the best step which you could take. You are now at the very apogée of your fashion, and are free to choose where you will.”

“Thank you; I never felt inclined so to forget myself but once, and then——”

“Well, sir,” said Sybil with a frown, as he paused.

“Why, then the folly was cured, thanks to you. I felt that my love would not suffice to win the only woman to whom I would willingly have surrendered my liberty, and the abortive trial rendered me wiser.”

“A poor excuse,” said Mrs. Mortimer, resolutely overcoming her confusion; “you must find a better.”

“Be it so. I remembered that conjugal love has no wings—that it is ‘of the earth, earthy,’—a lingering, grovelling deity of habit, rather than of taste, only fit to surmount the moss-grown pedestal of a cabbage-garden.”

Sybil was silent. What would she not have given to have been free to resent the insolence under which she writhed? But she *dared* not.

And the Rubicon once passed, these conversations were perpetually renewed; until Mrs. Mortimer, already more than half inclined to consider herself a victim, became superlatively convinced of the fact.

Thus were things situated in town when, wearied by the perpetually recurring dinners at which Mortimer collected all the idle and dissipated men of his set, who had amused themselves by vaunting their interest in the very quarters where he had been so long soliciting the constantly delayed appointment, Sybil, resolved not to be torn for ever from the world in which she delighted without one brilliant memory, issued, without consulting her husband upon the subject, cards for a ball, in which she determined, moreover, to excel herself.

An unlimited order to the most eminent upholsterer of the day, had sufficed to render the really beautiful mansion of Mrs. Mortimer a scene of light and splendour. Turkish tents opening upon miniature gardens, with marble basins flinging up their slender threads of water, which on rising into the perfumed air, parted in a shower of silver dust, that fell like a dew upon costly exotics, and drew out all their perfume; moorish chambers, with their quaintly gilded ornaments and velvet ottomans; a vast conservatory filled with tall tropical plants, and only lighted at intervals by painted Chinese lanterns, which left all in a voluptuous twilight; a ball-room blazing with tapers of pale pink wax; a staircase garlanded with flowers, and bright with festoons of parti-coloured lamps; enormous mirrors, cabinets of buhl, japan, and ormolu; vases of alabaster burning within their precious cavities the most subtle scents; an orchestra, alike numerous and well-chosen; all, in short, which luxury could invent or wealth could purchase, was lavished for one brief evening with unsparing hand.

Probably no one of his guests was half so much impressed by the magnificence of the whole scene as was Mortimer himself. Sybil had skilfully availed herself of his temporary absence from town to accomplish all her plans without the opposition which she foresaw that they would otherwise have experienced; and thus it was not until he entered his own house after a quiet dinner at his club—which his wife had forewarned him would be

impracticable at home—that the extent of her vain imprudence became known to him.

It was, however, too late to expostulate; and, moreover, nowhere could he find Sybil. He hurried to her favourite boudoir with a cloud upon his brow; but after having with some difficulty found his way there, so thoroughly was the interior of the whole mansion metamorphosed, that he only saw himself at the entrance of an Ottoman tent surrounded by a low divan covered with orange-coloured satin, the floor overlaid by a gorgeous carpet, and the walls hung with white persian. More and more disconcerted, he retraced his steps, resolved to shut himself into his own dressing-room until the arrival of the guests should compel him to emerge; but in such a hope he once more deceived himself. On arriving at the threshold he discovered that the door had been removed, and that the opening was now veiled only by curtains of silk gauze, falling one over the other, and all differing in tint.

Greatly annoyed on finding that even his own peculiar apartment had been invaded, he thrust the gossamer curtains somewhat roughly aside and entered, in order to satisfy himself to what extent his personal arrangements had suffered from the idle folly of the hour; and he was almost angry to find that, for a moment, his irritation yielded before his astonishment and admiration.

Never, assuredly, was there a prettier conceit. The idea had been Sybil's, and the fashionable artist to whom it had been imparted had worked it out to perfection.

Mortimer stood for a few moments entranced. Soon, however, a darker reflection crossed his mind, and the recklessness of Sybil, as it forced itself upon his memory, recalled him to other and less agreeable sensations. All his warnings, it was now evident, had been unavailing; she was coolly preparing his ultimate ruin, in order to gratify her own weak vanity; and she had, moreover, condescended to take advantage of his absence from his home to plunge into a vortex of extravagance which she was well aware that he must disapprove, and would have forbidden.

It was consequently with anything rather than a smile that the master of this palace of pleasure, which was still loud with busy voices and hurrying steps, once more

emerged from what, despite its beauty, he considered as his desecrated dressing-room; and having with some difficulty succeeded in finding one of his own footmen, was conducted to a small apartment, opening from the servants' hall, which had been hastily prepared for him.

His valet was soon in attendance; every temporary arrangement had been judiciously made for his comfort; a cheerful fire blazed upon the hearth; and could he have divested himself of all thought of the future, he would soon have recovered his equanimity.

Sybil, meanwhile, was radiant with happiness and triumph. She had resolved not to meet her husband until she was protected from his reproaches by the presence of her guests, and thus she had the whole long, glorious night before her.

And it was to secure so questionable a triumph and so equivocal a gratification as this that the proud Sybil had subjected herself to possible mortification, and her husband to inevitable embarrassment, to parade her vanity for a few hours in all its panoply of luxury and recklessness, and to be the theme of gossip for a week.

Even little Eva was forgotten, and not once during that busy day did she see her mother. But what then? Had not that mother been fully engaged in her domestic duties?

Ere long, carriage after carriage drove to the door, and deposited a bevy of pretty women and fashionable idlers in the illuminated hall. The rooms filled rapidly; and, as Sybil stood near the entrance of the principal saloon, and received her guests with the high-bred self-possession for which she was remarkable, many a haughty eye rested upon her for an instant in wondering curiosity. For the moment she had disarmed criticism. The elegant simplicity of her dress, rendered the more conspicuous by the magnificence with which she was surrounded, astonished those who came to smile or to sneer at the *parvenue* who filled her rooms by the agency of her acquaintance, for it was evident at once that Mrs. Mortimer was no novice.

Surprise followed upon surprise. No incongruity was perceptible in the splendour of her princely saloons; no paltry expedients, no ignorant deficiencies, could be

detected ; all was perfect ; and a low murmur of admiration, reluctantly extorted, and therefore the better appreciated, ere long met her ear on all sides.

At length her first duty was fulfilled ; the strains of music were audible from the ball-room ; the confusion had in some degree disentangled itself : there were groups of talkers, solitary gazers, smiling couples established upon sofas in confidential *tête-à-tête* ; gray-headed nobles and overdressed matrons established at the card-tables ; in short, the skein was unravelled, and Sybil had time and opportunity to think only of herself.

Some scores of her guests had no sooner made their bow to their hostess upon the threshold, than they had utterly forgotten " what manner of woman " she was ; and among these were mothers, who had brought their young and beautiful daughters under a strange roof, simply because they knew that there they would meet once more with a timid or undecided admirer, and that as the season was drawing to its close, every opportunity of collision had consequently become tenfold more desirable ; young wives, weary of home, and greedy of admiration ; and fair girls whose heart beat high, and whose eyes sought the floor, at every name which was announced, while caring only to distinguish one.

To these, and such as these, the donor of the *fête* was a personage too unimportant to occupy their thoughts beyond a moment. They had deeper, or at least more personal, interests ; and thus, as Sybil glided through her costly rooms, she did not escape the penalty of her weakness. With some difficulty she at last passed on.

" But should I be presented to Mrs. Mortimer, mamma ; " said a lovely girl, deprecatingly, as the hostess was once more stopped by the broad shoulders and jewelled turban of a voluminous dowager ; " What am I to do ? "

" Be civil, Honoria, of course ; but no more. You did not come here to form an acquaintance with this person, but to meet Lord Alfred. Once for all I tell you, child, that there is some strange story about her ; and that is enough. All that you have to do is to remember why I brought you here, and to make a better use of the opportunity than you have done of others which I have given you. Recollect that this is your second season."

Once more Sybil moved on.

"And Saviatti really told you this story, and vouched for it?" were the next articulate sounds which met her ear, as, partially concealed by the draperies of a window, she stood behind a group of young men. "Upon my conscience, the jest is a good one! And so Trevor was done?"

"Ay, thoroughly; but he only lost his money. What say you to the simple Damon who, like a silly sheep as he was, stepped into the breach?"

There was a light, mocking chorus of laughter.

"Nevertheless, she is a monstrous fine woman," remarked one of the party.

"Glorious!" was the ready response; "Incomparable for a wife *à la Régence*; but ——"

"Suffer me to pass, gentlemen," said Sybil, haughtily, as she emerged from her concealment, and stood before them. "My duties as a hostess compel me to disturb your conversation.

A general, but silent bow succeeded, and, as the group made way, Mrs Mortimer traversed it with the air of an empress.

Her comparative solitude was, however, now over; and even although her spirit burnt within her at the insults to which she had been subjected, she was too thoroughly mistress of her emotion to suffer one trace of displeasure to become apparent.

And still the revel progressed; the lights shone brightly; the music swept like speaking odours through the vast apartments; fond vows, and many false as fond, were whispered in the dim conservatory; hundreds exchanged owners at the card-tables; the luxurious supper-room was perpetually filled and emptied of its votaries, and daylight at length struggled to penetrate through the satin folds of the jealous curtains.

Mortimer had staked and lost heavily. He dreamt for several hours that he had found a counter-influence to that of his wife; but he deceived himself; her eyes had never beguiled him more surely to his ruin than did the cards that night. Eager to forget, and equally eager to enjoy, he had readily fallen into a snare, and surrounded by a bevy of his friends he had, after a score of desperate plunges, become their prey.

Sybil had left the ball-room on the arm of Sir Horace Trevor, and was listening with delight to the enthusiastic encomiums which he lavished upon her taste, and the perfect harmony of all her arrangements. It soothed her to hear that by one at least of her guests she was appreciated; but the one spot of flame still burned and festered upon her spirit.

"Wealth is a wizard," she answered, with a contemptuous smile, to one of his remarks; "the wife of a soap-boiler could have done all this, aye, and more, had her resources served her;—but come this way, and I believe that I can show you something which no mere gold could have created;" and as she spoke she led him towards the gauze-screened cabinet which has been already described.

"Just as I could have wished;" she said, rather speaking to herself than addressing her companion; "The giddy fools have not hitherto discovered this retreat; and yet it is the pearl of the huge oyster which I have opened for their amusement. What say you to this fairy-nook, Sir Horace?"

"What can I say?" murmured Trevor, after a momentary pause, during which his quick eye had glanced from floor to ceiling; "What can I say?" he repeated as they advanced towards the table, followed in their progress by a moving vapour of gauze, which floated above and about them, as the tinted clouds undulate beneath the beams of the setting sun; "save that the shrine is worthy of the goddess?"

Sybil smiled as she took possession of one of the vacant chairs, while Trevor established himself in the other, after having drawn it to her side.

"Nothing can be more poetical, more dream-like;" he pursued, lifting one of the light fans from the table: "Why should it be but the mere vision of a night, to be subjected to-morrow to the rude hands of hirelings, and desecrated by vulgar intrusion?"

"Learn like me;" said his companion; "to live in the present; and to leave the future to its own developments. Do you know Trevor, that the consciousness that *you* would appreciate this grateful fantasy sufficed to me, and I cared little though it should be overlooked, as you see it

has been, by the soulless beings who have passed it by to bask in light, and to bewilder themselves by noise."

As she ceased speaking, Sybil turned with one of her most radiant looks towards her listener. She anticipated some acknowledgment, but for a moment he made no reply; his eyes were rivetted upon the pretty plaything, composed of marabouts, and dusted with silver, which he was twirling in his hand.

The silence was only temporary, however, and it was abruptly broken.

"Sybil," murmured the baronet, without changing his position, or abstaining from his inconsequent occupation, "I had no idea that Mortimer had either taste or nerve for high play."

"And has he?" asked the worldly wife in an accent of the most supreme indifference.

"His prowess of to-night would seem to imply as much. When I left the card-room he was a heavy loser."

"He should not have ventured beyond his depth," was the quiet retort; and the words once uttered, Sybil began, in her turn, to amuse herself by collecting and clustering the scattered roses which were strewn over the table.

"Mortimer was rash, at such a time, and in such company, to tempt fortune," he continued, as he drew one of the roses from her hand, and after pressing it to his lips, placed it in his bosom. "If you do not exert your influence he will soon undermine his fortune."

"What if no such influence existed?"

"Is not the man human?"

"Very—I must not suffer you to wrong him even by a doubt. Does he not live? breathe? move? frequent his clubs? and pay his tradesmen's bills?"

"But should the ruin come, Sybil?"

"Once more, I say, leave the future to its own resources. Where do you spend the summer?"

"In Italy, or—at Westrum."

"Oh, not at Westrum," exclaimed Mrs. Mortimer, startled out of her habitual composure; "we are to have *maison close* during the next nine months."

"Then, decidedly, it must be Italy."

"And who are your party?"

"I am weary of joint-stock tours, where the sum-total is

composed of insignificant units. I covet a single companion, and will admit no more."

"Be wary, then," said Sybil, almost with a sigh; "you do not know the misery of an ill-chosen and enforced companionship with one solitary individual."

"I can imagine it."

"No doubt," was the rejoinder, as the eyes of Trevor flashed with a sudden light; "but imagination is not experience."

"I shall not tempt that experience. I shall act upon sure grounds."

But why leave England, where you have so many resources?" asked Sybil.

"Because I am sick of the folly and selfishness of all about me. I have lived for pleasure long enough, and will henceforward live only for happiness."

"Then, after all your disclaimers, you are really going to marry."

"You are epigrammatic, Mrs. Mortimer."

"You will make a bad husband, Trevor."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"And why?"

"Because you detest coercion; and were you mated with an angel, you would quarrel with her wings because she had allowed you to clip them."

"Well, perhaps you are right," conceded Sir Horace, fixing his eyes steadily upon her face; "perhaps I might despise her, when I remembered that she had weakly resigned the beautiful and glorious prerogative of freedom, and meanly chained herself to the steps of the altar on which she should have towered as the idol; that she had, from a mere puerile clinging to the conventions of a society which possessed no right—and perhaps as little inclination—to dictate her actions, tamely scattered upon the earth the leaves of the roses with which she should have crowned herself."

"You argue like a libertine."

"The word is sufficiently comprehensive at all events."

"Is it not applicable? What can I understand but that you contemplate the companionship of a mistress?"

"You take strange liberties with our barbarous vernacular to-night, fair Sybil. However, in one sense, I admit the term, unpoetical as it is. Yes, the partner of my wanderings beneath the blue skies and the flowery bowers of Italy, and wheresoever else her good pleasure may direct my footsteps, even though it should be beyond the cataracts of the Nile, or to the sandy deserts of mysterious Africa, shall indeed be the very mistress of my soul—the supreme sovereign of my destiny. I will have no will, no wish, no existence, save in her."

"Beware of such utter self-abnegation; she may deceive you."

"I have no such fear; I am fore-armed."

"By what occult power?"

"By my love—my claim—my—I will echo your own words—my perfect self-abnegation. I could have no better safeguard."

"You are a happy man, even in your voluntary delusion."

"Pardon me; I am not deluded, or—should it indeed be so—Sybil——"

Mrs. Mortimer started, and her cheek burned. She turned away; she would have spoken, but she could not control her voice.

"Listen to me, Sybil," said Sir Horace, gaining courage from her visible confusion; and as he spoke he grasped her hand, and retained it despite her struggle to free herself from the clasp. "You are not happy. Remember you are not the acquaintance of yesterday, and that our hearts spoke audibly years ago. I love you—I know all the paltry and pitiful restraints of your present position. To-night you are the queen of a brilliant circle—the admired and the envied mistress of a fairy palace; but the night, wire-draw it as you may, can only last some three hours longer; and then comes to-morrow—to-morrow with an irritated and reproachful husband, who, forgetting his own imprudence at the gaming-table, will visit upon you the results of an improvidence to which his fortune is by no means adequate. Look at the floating of the light draperies which are heaving about you as you struggle to escape my hold; to-morrow the hammer of the workman, a few nails withdrawn, and a few sturdy blows, will reduce all their gracefulness into a heap of rags; and after that—for more

remains behind, Sybil—after that you have a long and dreary perspective before you, to which you cannot, you *shall* not tamely yield. Westrum, with, as you have already confessed, closed doors, a dreaming mother and a sulking husband! And is this to be the end of all, Sybil? Was it to fulfil such a destiny as this that Nature made you a mark for admiration and worship? That you were gifted with talents that dazzle, with a wit that fascinates, and with a mind which can appreciate and sympathise with all that is grand and beautiful?”

“Enough, Sir Horace; enough.”

“Yet must you hear more,” relentlessly pursued her tempter; “for I have resolved to convince your reason. For what, and why, do you willingly and wilfully bow your proud neck to such a yoke? To gratify the prejudices of an exacting and misjudging world? Fie upon such mere womanly weakness! Where are your obligations to this world which you would elevate into a censor? Nature, nature has been your benefactress; it is her, and her alone, to whom you owe allegiance; the world has to you been only a stepdame, or you would not be to-day the wife of Mortimer—of a man who cannot comprehend you, but who wears you as the ignorant *parvenue* wears her diamond necklace—not with an appreciation of its real brilliancy, but with a vulgar consciousness that it is an object of envy. What have the refined and town-bred Sybil Delamere, and the country squire, whose soul is in his acres—what have they, I ask, what *can* they have in common? As yet you have blinded yourself to this truth, for as yet you have not been utterly flung upon his insignificance for companionship and sympathy; he has left the reins loose and the bit has not galled you, but you are already warned that the scene and the system are both about to change.”

“Sir Horace, I will hear no more.”

“Only one last appeal—Sybil, divine Sybil! Be at last just to yourself. You once loved me; and there are yet moments in which I fancy that I can detect some evidence that you love me still. I offer to you the devotion of a life, the resources of an ample fortune, an existence of splendour and indulgence, the undying fervour of a passion which you alone have been able to awaken—Sybil, do I, indeed, plead in vain?”

Mrs. Mortimer strove to rise; but her companion was already kneeling beside her, and his grasp was strong upon her dress.

"Are you not aware, sir," she asked, with flashing eyes, "that you are urging me to dishonour?"

"Sybil," murmured Sir Horace, "your ear is quick, and your eye keen; has not the revel of to-night, held in your own saloons, provided by your own gold, created by your own taste, taught you to despise so poor a chimera? There are noble dames yonder, rustling their satins, waving their plumes, and parading their magnificent nothingness—but is one of them at your side? Has one of them claimed companionship with you? Have you met respect, or even consideration, from one of the haughty eyes which have fastened admiringly upon the gaudy toys that you have scattered in their path? Are you not aware that among the glittering mob which you have collected about you there are friends of Saviatti, and that Saviatti is——"

"A fiend! a demon!" fiercely exclaimed Sybil.

"You help my argument," was the rapid rejoinder, "and, as such, the less scrupulous. You have the effects of his idle indiscretion before you. And mark me, Sybil—Mortimer, weak as he may be on other points, is sensitive and jealous of his honour! A husband—the fact is proverbial—may be, and generally is, the last to hear that by which he is the most closely affected; but, trust me, he is eventually enlightened. Do you comprehend your position now, my adored Sybil? And do you believe that, loving you as I do, I can coldly abandon you to such a fate?"

"Trevor," whispered Mrs. Mortimer hoarsely, as her head sank upon her bosom, "you are unmerciful."

Sir Horace still knelt before her, and was about to soothe the wounded dignity which he had so relentlessly excited, when the vapoury curtain was thrust aside, and the baby face of Mrs. Lamerly protruded like some frightful vision through the opening. A slight shriek escaped her lips, as she suffered the light folds of the gauze to float back into their places; and then succeeded a ringing laugh, as her lisping voice was heard exclaiming imperiously, "No, no; you shall not move a step further! It is the prettiest place you ever saw in your life; all white and silver, like a moon among the clouds; but you shall not see it. We should all be *de trop*; for Mrs. Mortimer is

there with Sir Horace Trevor, and I think they are rehearsing a tragedy, or a comedy, or something of that sort; for he is on his knees, and she looks—but, upon my honour, I scarcely know how she looks!—it would have been so indiscreet to intrude longer.”

Then followed a deep silence, broken only by the sound of retreating footsteps, and the agonized ear of Sybil detected that they were those of several individuals. The thickly-piled carpets soon muffled that light sound, and then all was still as the grave.

“Sir Horace Trevor,” said Mrs. Mortimer, as she rose from her seat, ghastly pale, and with a quivering lip, “You have bought me at a fearful price! Leave me now. We shall meet again.”

“To-morrow, Sybil?”

She coldly bent her head in token of acquiescence.

“Farewell, then, till to-morrow.” He hastily raised her cold fingers to his lips, drew back the curtains of the door, and disappeared.

Even amid her anguish the proud spirit of Mrs. Mortimer scorned to bend, and after a severe struggle she succeeded in subduing every vestige of emotion, and with a steady step and a proud eye returned to her guests. She saw Mrs. Lamerly surrounded by a group of curious listeners, who were all too earnest in their attention to detect her approach, and towards them she firmly made her way.

“Why are you not dancing, Amabel?” she inquired, with perfect composure, as she reached her side.

The diplomatist’s widow started, flushed, and stammered out with some difficulty, “I am fatigued, Mrs. Mortimer.”

“Mrs. Mortimer!” echoed Sybil, raising her eyebrows in affected and playful surprise. “Why, Amabel, you are ceremonious to-night. Remember that you are in a simple English drawing-room, and not in the court-circle of your dear friend the Margrave.”

“I do not understand,” faltered the widow.

“What I understand, *ma chère*,” broke in a little German Gräfin, who had been one of her listeners, “is, that you have betrayed me. I shall not expect you to-morrow evening. Good night.” And, with a haughty and indignant bow, the ruffled beauty swept from the room.

“As she pleases,” said Mrs. Lamerly, with a pout;

“but I could quote, if I pleased, the old adage about glass windows and throwing stones. However, my turn will come.”

Sybil turned away with a haughty mien, but her very soul was sick within her. She had heard and understood all. There were other demons in the world besides Saviatti; and how she began to hate and scorn that world! Trevor was right; and she would trample it even to the dust.

Her rooms emptied rapidly. The lights were beginning to fail; the musicians were putting up their instruments; group after group passed her by on their way out without one token of observance or recognition. At length the very link-boys dispersed—the revel was over: and Sybil was left amid the relics of her brief splendour utterly alone—alone with her hopes, her fears, her stifled passion, and her corroding thoughts.

Frederic had retired to his room, angered, repentant, and reflective; Sybil had sought hers fevered, undecided, and nevertheless desperate. The husband, boldly looking into the future, although with a sick heart and a stricken spirit, had passed his time in hasty and imperfect calculations, and those vague but passionate resolutions of future prudence which, like snow-flakes in the moonlight, show so substantial and so brilliant, but which require only one touch of heat to annihilate them altogether; the wife had sought solitude to brood over the past, to deprecate the present, and to defy the future.

Sybil had dismissed her attendant. It seemed to her as though every eye could read her secret; and as her thoughts fastened upon her last interview with Trevor, she thrust back the dark braids from her forehead, for even their light and accustomed pressure appeared to weigh her down; and then, rising from her chair, flung open one of the windows in order to breathe more freely.

It was long past mid-day when her maid ventured to enter her apartment.

“Ha! is it morning so soon?” murmured out Sybil, who had started from her sleep at the first whisper.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am,” was the respectful reply; “but it is now nearly two o’clock. My master has been out for the last three hours, and desired me to say that he should not return home until the evening. Miss Eva has

had her walk ; and Mrs. Harris wishes to know if you will see her before dinner-time."

"No, no," said Sybil hoarsely and hurriedly ; "I am too much fatigued. There—look!—upon the dressing-table you will find a locket, hung to a small gold chain. You know the one I mean—with my hair in it, at the back of her father's portrait. Tell Mrs. Harris to give it to her with my love, and to let her wear it till I see her again. Is there anything new?—letters, or——"

"No, ma'am, only Sir Horace Trevor has been here ; but when he found that my master was out, and that you were not up, he left word that he would call again at two o'clock, as he wished to see you, ma'am, on some particular business ; and so I made free to come into your room."

"You did right, Symonds, perfectly right," said Sybil with a slight shudder, as she partially raised herself, and, sweeping back her dishevelled hair, leant her head upon her hand. "And now come here, Symonds ; here, close to my pillow. Can I trust you?"

"Try me, ma'am," said the woman.

"You must have seen that I am not happy," commenced Sybil, fixing her eyes steadily upon her attendant. I mistook Mr. Mortimer, and it is probable that he misunderstood me. Things cannot go on thus, Symonds."

"Of course not, ma'am."

"It is possible that I may travel before long. Are you willing to accompany me?"

"Do you take Miss Eva, ma'am ? I can't undertake to travel with children ; it's out of my line."

The mother for a moment conquered the woman of the world, and Mrs. Mortimer turned aside to avoid the fixed gaze of her hired menial ; but in spirit she had passed the Rubicon, and she rallied on the instant.

"No," she said, with some effort, "I go alone."

"Alone, ma'am?"

"That is, neither your master nor Miss Eva will accompany me."

"I see, ma'am," was the reply, uttered with one of those intelligently-confidential smiles which are the first-fruits of error to a proud spirit. "I am quite at your service, and ready to go wherever you please. But you are forgetting the time, ma'am. If Sir Horace Trevor should be here before you are dressed, is he to wait, or to come again?"

"Let him wait," said Sybil, with the superb expression of disdain by which the haughty lip so frequently conceals the secret of the quailing heart. "He is, probably, not in haste."

"Sir Horace was quite put out, ma'am, when he found that you were not up," she ventured to remark, as she placed the velvet slippers beside the bed.

"Indeed!" said Sybil, with affected indifference.

"And then, ma'am, he inquired for my master, and I told him that he was gone out for the day."

"You told him so?"

"Yes, ma'am; did I do wrong?"

"Oh, no, no! it is a matter of no consequence. By the by, Symonds, you will not mention to any one that I think of leaving England."

"Of course not, ma'am, if you don't wish it."

"I do not, Symonds, and I believe that I can trust you. Is my bath ready?"

The first scene in the drama of guilt was played out, and Sybil felt that she was in the power of her own salaried dependant.

It were idle to dwell upon the scene which ensued when Sir Horace and Sybil met. How could such an interview end save in error?

In such a case the preliminaries of the meditated flight were rapidly and readily arranged; and Trevor had no sooner left the house, than the twice-perjured wife ascended to her own room, and, summoning her maid, busied herself, with a calmness which in a holier cause would have amounted to heroism, in making such arrangements as she deemed necessary.

The place of rendezvous had been arranged, and on her arrival Mrs. Mortimer alighted.

With a moral cowardice quite in keeping with his character, Mortimer had delayed to the last moment his return to a disorganized house, and the exertion of an authority which he was conscious must be at once assumed, if he would still preserve himself from ruin; and it was consequently late in the night when he once more found himself under his own roof. The hateful task of recrimination and reproach was thus delayed until to-morrow; and, as he ascended to his dressing-room, already restored by the activity of his valet to a tenable state, he congratulated

himself upon an arrangement by which he had secured some additional hours of tranquillity.

His only inquiry was for his child; and satisfied that she was well, and sleeping the sweet sleep of innocence and peace, he drew on his dressing-gown, and seated himself at his writing-table, resolved to bestow a few hours to the careful inspection of his steward's accounts before he retired for the night. Upon the desk, however, lay the letters which had been mentioned to Sybil, and he opened them mechanically. The first which came to hand was brief, but a shadow darkened over his brow as he read it; scarcely did it comprise half-a-dozen lines, yet he pondered over them for several seconds; and then, by a sudden impulse, he crushed the paper in his hand, and flung it impetuously into the fire which was burning in the grate. His correspondent had simply and courteously acknowledged a cheque for £900, lost by himself at the gaming-table on the previous evening. The next was longer; the writing more round, studied, and methodical; and treated of a debt not yet discharged, in less courtly terms. The third was a civil refusal to exert the interest which he had stooped to solicit in furtherance of his favourite project, by one of his most intimate associates and most frequent guests; and a bitter smile convulsed his lip as he laid it down. There was still, however, a fourth; and, without even glancing at the superscription, he tore it open. In an instant he had mastered its contents; and, starting from his seat, he rang the bell violently.

In another moment the summons was obeyed.

"Howton!" he said, in considerable agitation, "I have received a letter from Westrum; Mrs. Delamere is dying, and no time must be lost if we would again see her alive. Send one of the men to order post-horses; throw together some linen, and whatever you may consider necessary, and let the carriage be at the door by the time your mistress is ready to start. Meanwhile I will go and prepare her. We must be on the road within an hour."

"I fear, sir, that it will be impossible."

"And why so? Nothing should be impossible at such a moment."

"My lady is from home, sir."

"From home?—where?—when did she go?"

"She left at about six o'clock, sir, accompanied by Mrs.

Symonds, and dismissed the carriage after alighting at her milliner's?"

"And what orders did she give?"

"Merely that the carriage might return, and that she would let them know when she required it again."

"Ha! I see it all now—I understand it all," said Mortimer, in an accent of vexation; "your mistress has found herself inconvenienced by the noise and bustle of the workmen, and has consequently left the house for the night; but surely there must have been some note or message to explain this arrangement to me?"

"No, sir, or I should of course have been informed of it."

"Still I am convinced that I am right," persisted Mortimer, "and she probably determined too suddenly to pursue this plan to remember that I might be uneasy."

"I scarcely think so, sir," said the man, steadily; "for Mrs. Symonds had the imperial of my mistress's carriage taken to her room early in the day, and it was packed when she left home."

"A convincing proof of the correctness of my suggestion," retorted Mortimer, without one misgiving; "that fact alone would suffice to satisfy me that I have discovered the truth, as it was impossible that she could pass the night out of her own house without some preparation."

The man bowed, and left the room; and if he marvelled at the blindness of his master, he had at least the discretion to remain silent.

Mortimer assuredly felt no extraordinary affection for Mrs. Delamere—hers was not one of those endearing natures which command attachment; but he respected her as the mother of his wife, and he was aware that the absence of Sybil only rendered his duty to that mother the more imperative. Hastily, therefore, but considerately, he communicated in the note which he proceeded to write, the absolute necessity of her immediate appearance at Westrum; urged her to fortitude, and even to hope, and informed her of the arrangements which he had made to facilitate her journey.

This was scarcely accomplished, when his travelling-chaise was announced; and five minutes afterwards the portmanteau and carpet-bags were packed away, master and man were seated in the vehicle, and it drove off in the direction of Westrum at the best speed of four swift horses.

CHAPTER XLIX.

By a singular coincidence Sybil and Gertrude left London on the same day.

We cannot follow Sybil and her seducer on their journey. In so far as they are concerned our task is ended.

Gertrude left London as she had entered it, pure, humble-minded and gentle. Her spirit was still saddened by the remembrance of the squalid death-bed beside which she had stood so lately, and she almost felt as though it were a sin to exult in the possession of wealth which had been purchased by such privations. Yet still she smiled as she remembered that she had left one happy heart behind her, and that the humble Mrs. Sharp, made rich beyond her hopes by the possession of the scanty stock of furniture at Walworth, and permission to follow her in a few months, in order to be established under her roof for life, had blessed her as they parted; and that the meek old man who now sat beside her in the chaise, proudly attired in a new suit of black, was rescued from a drudgery unsuited to his years by a slight alteration in her uncle's will, which had exchanged the bequest to an income of the same amount.

Miss Warrington looked doubly erect and doubly stern, as she saw her niece not only alight from an expensive travelling conveyance, but even introduce beneath her roof, and without her permission, a person to whom she was a stranger.

A messenger was despatched to the Manor-house to announce the return of Gertrude, and ere long Ernest Armstrong bounded into the house. Welcomes and reproaches were poured forth volubly from his lips. Gertrude had no right to sacrifice herself to the selfish caprices of a stranger.

"My dear mother's only brother!" urged the gentle girl.

"And still a stranger," persisted the young man as he sat beside her, clasping her hand, and looking anxiously into her face. "And have you reflected on all the results of your ill-advised journey?—Upon your pallid cheeks,

which we had taught to bloom again at Bletchley?—Had we not, Miss Warrington?—Upon a responsibility to which you were unequal; and a fatigue, against which you had not physical strength to contend? You smile! Well, then, I will ask only one more question: Has it never occurred to you that the same quixotic delicacy of feeling which took you, like a lady-errant, to London in search of extraordinary adventures, and which may perhaps prompt you to delay a marriage already definitely fixed at some six weeks hence, may at last weary out my forbearance?"

The happy girl shook her head defyingly.

"Do not be too confident in your own strength, Gertrude," said Ernest impatiently: "Sydenham vows that Mary shall keep her word; and I vow ——"

Gertrude playfully laid her hand upon his lips.

"And the villa?" she asked.

The young man looked up anxiously and inquiringly.

"You know, Mr. Armstrong, that you half promised me that villa behind the hill, with its pretty shrubberies, and fish-ponds, and balconies, and aviary, and flower-garden. I have set my heart upon becoming its mistress. Are you prepared to gratify me?"

"Alas, my sweet Gertrude, that dream at least cannot be realised! I have failed in my efforts to secure personal independence—miserably failed; and you must even be content to accept the home which my father offers to us under his own roof. Will you not do this, dearest?"

"No, I must have the villa."

With a gasp of agony, Ernest Armstrong started to his feet, but she held him back.

"Listen to me," she said, with a pale cheek and a trembling voice, "listen to me, and forgive me! I have returned to you rich, fabulously rich—this gentleman—my aunt will tell you all! Do I not owe respect to the memory of him who has enabled me to give myself to you without a blush at my own penury? I have played with your feelings, and I am self-condemned; pardon me, therefore, and grant my last request; defer our marriage, and hereafter I will have no will but yours."

The tale was soon told, and even the lover was convinced, although he still murmured. The flushed cheek of Miss Warrington, the proud eye of Mr. Jackson,

and the meek affection of the orphan, which almost seemed to ask forgiveness for a prosperity that rendered her his equal in the eyes of the world, all tended to awaken him to a perfect consciousness of the great and unexpected change which had taken place in her fortunes; and yet it was with a mingled feeling that he murmured, as he released her hand, "Gertrude, I rejoice for you—for myself—for all!—and, still, I would ask you never to forget that I loved you before this strange event had come to pass."

"When I forget it, may I forget myself," murmured the orphan, overawed by his emotion. "But why should you look so coldly, Ernest? Is this gold to bring distrust between us?"

Who cannot guess the answer? And who requires to be told that the villa was ready long ere the six months of mourning had expired? Was Gertrude happy? Yes; she had within her all the elements of happiness. Her empire was home—her throne the heart of her husband—her ambition a career of virtue, purity, and affection.

It was a fortnight after her return to Bletchley; and sorrow came to her, as sorrows often come, through the most common-place medium—the post. When she rose in the morning, she found a letter which Hannah had laid upon her dressing-table. The hand-writing had been long unseen, but never forgotten.

Thus ran the letter:—

"Gertrude—I used to shun, but I now welcome the idea that you once loved me. I dare not disbelieve the hope. If it were indeed a fact, I am saved; if it were only a fiction, strive, I implore you, for the sake of one as pure, as lovely, and as loving as yourself, to remember that we were bound together by the ties both of relationship and affection. I have no right to appeal to you; nor do I arrogate one. I will not even seek to justify myself at the expense of another. I am conscious, too miserably conscious of all my weakness, all my inconsistency. But my mother—my mother, Gertrude, loved us both. Listen to me for her sake. I am sitting here alone—alone! Do you comprehend all the meaning which may be condensed into that one solitary word? Alone, in the stately saloon of one of the stateliest mansions of London. My child is

above stairs. I dare not trust myself at this moment to see her near me. I have just returned from Westrum; from the vault of my family, where I stood, as an empty niche received the body of—yes, Gertrude, of the mother of my wife—and would you know where that wife was, at the very moment when I was thus engaged? I will tell you. In the arms of a paramour; a pretended cousin; of a perfidious friend, of a fiend, whose name will hang like a curse upon my lips in my death-agony. Sybil has ruined her child. For myself I care not. What have I to regret? Yet Eva is young, too young to have been contaminated by bad example, or humbled by compassion. Ah, Gertrude, I cannot tell you what she is! Her glorious beauty may perchance be the reflection of her mother's; but her clinging love, her gentle nature, her endearing sweetness—these are all your own. Will you reject her? England is no longer a home for me. The principles which I imbibed from my mother's lips, ill as I have employed them, forbid self-destruction; and I will live on as some expiation for four years of weakness and of folly. But I cannot endure shame. The first finger which was pointed against me would sear into my spirit like a brand; and therefore, from henceforth, so long as I may be condemned to drag on an existence which has become weary and loathsome to me, I shall remain an exile. Yes, Gertrude, an exile from all that I have loved: my country, my home, and, above all, my child, my blessed child! But let me not weary you. I have looked my partial ruin steadily in the face, and I have ascertained that it may be repaired by time. Eva is yet an infant; and thus I have ventured to retain a sufficient income to secure me against want, which will be remitted to me by a confidential person, who will know, and will faithfully preserve, the secret of all my movements. When those remittances cease to be claimed, I shall be at peace; and, meanwhile, Eva's prosperity will be secured. Gertrude, this is a last appeal! Receive it as a request from the grave. I shall remain in England until I ascertain that my child is under your protection—happy in your love—safe in your example. I advance no claim upon your pity, your charity, your for-

bearance. Again I say that I *dare* not. Yet still I hope—

“FREDERIC MORTIMER.”

* * * * *

“Who was that beautiful woman with whom you were conversing just now?” asked Lord Francis Lorimer of his friend Greville, between the pauses of a quadrille.

“Beautiful!” echoed Greville with enthusiasm; “she is an angel! You remember Mortimer, whose wife eloped with Trevor about twenty years ago, when we were somewhat younger than we are to-night, and were dancers instead of lookers-on. Well, that radiant woman was her daughter—a mere infant in the nursery—and see her now!

“By Jove! she treads like an empress,” exclaimed his listener.

“And feels like a woman,” retorted Lord Francis; “I know but one wife or mother in the kingdom whom I value more than herself, and that is——”

“Mrs. Armstrong,” said Greville, with an animated smile. And glad am I to find that even amid your admiration for younger and brighter beauty, you can still do her justice. Had I a dozen sons, I would strive to marry them all to the daughters of Mrs. Armstrong.”

THE END.

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